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CHRISTINA NORTH.

VOL. II.



# CHRISTINA NORTH.

BY  
E. M. ARCHER.

*“ His life is as a woven rope,  
A single strand may lightly part :  
Love’s simple thread is all her hope,  
Which breaking, breaks her heart.”*

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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# CHRISTINA NORTH.

## CHAPTER XV.

BERNARD OSWESTRY had left Overton restless and unhappy, and sore at heart. Christina had been his chief object ever since he could remember; all his hopes and projects had centred in her; and now it was not only that they were shattered, but they had been shattered by her in a way which had left him no one point upon which to seize for consolation. It was not only that she had been inconstant with no excuse; it was not, as he thought, that she cared for anyone else; but simply that for the sake of pleasing her relations and escaping from the difficulties of her position, she had been ready to break the promises upon which he had built so

much. It was because of all this that he could not forgive her—not yet—not although he had seen her remorseful and unhappy, not although she had pleaded to him as she had never pleaded to him before. And yet he could not thrust her away altogether. It is not so easily that a true and tender heart can shut itself against the love in which it has trusted. And Bernard loved her still, not as he had loved her before, for sorrow and indignation had taken the place of hope and trust; but yet his love had not passed out of him—it was part of himself, and could not be got rid of.

He left Overton and threw himself into his work with an energy that never flagged, and a patience that was never exhausted. It was a busy life that he led, and fortunately for him there was much of out-door occupation and physical exertion to counteract the effect of his late hours and incessant work.

The architect under whom he was engaged had his office in the midst of a large and thickly popu-

lated manufacturing town in the north of England. In the centre of squalor and misery he was raising a church, beautiful in its proportions and rich in its architectural adornments, to stand as a witness for Christianity in the midst of a heathen generation ; and it was upon this that Bernard was chiefly engaged as a young man of promise, capable of superintending the more delicate parts, in which taste was as necessary as mechanical skill. But he had also expeditions to make into the country, long days to spend in hurrying from place to place through the fresh air, which gave him a relief both mental and physical, else the perpetual strain upon his nerves must have broken down even his naturally healthy organization. He was young and inexperienced, and it was thus that he strove to drive away thought.

Even old Mr. Withers, the head of the firm, who rarely condescended to give a thought to the well-being or characters of his clerks, noticed the change in him ; for he had before been struck by his light-hearted zeal as much as by his aptitude for his

business. Now he went so far as to remark on his pale and altered looks, and to inquire if he had anything on his mind,—had he been getting into money difficulties? He did not like to see a young man who didn't care for reasonable relaxations, and came to office in the morning looking as if he had been up all night.

Bernard thanked him, but laughed at the idea that anything was wrong with him; he would confide nothing; and Mr. Withers, who had made an unusual exertion in broaching the subject, said no more, but was rather confirmed in his suspicions. He said he was sorry for it; he feared young Oswestry was going to the bad: there was a hardness about him he did not like to see; and he was positively alarmed when one day on going into the church he found Bernard walking unconcernedly about on some scaffolding at the top of the nave, where even old hands would have gone with precaution and some appliances for safety.

“What do you mean, sir?” he asked angrily, when

Bernard had leisurely descended into the body of the church. "It is not your business to be dancing the tight-rope here! If you want to break your neck, I beg it may not happen in my church."

"There was no danger, sir. I had gone to examine the carving," Bernard answered quietly; but Mr. Withers said to himself that he was not only hard, but reckless.

Thus it was that he passed the fortnight of Christina's engagement to Mr. Warde, and then came the letter which told of what had taken place, and of how she was now Captain Cleasby's promised wife. He could not understand it for the moment. His mother's letter had come to him in the morning, but he had felt little interest in it, and a dislike to anything which would carry his thoughts back to Overton, and so he had thrust it into his pocket, and it was not until the dinner hour came round, and the workmen had dispersed, that he thought of reading it.

He had been round the corner of the street and

got his glass of beer and bread and cheese for luncheon, and now he had nothing to do until two o'clock should strike; so he went back into the empty church and took out his letter.

Few of the windows were as yet put in, and the wind blew chilly through the large empty church where the workmen's tools were lying about, and the blocks of unsculptured stone were the only landmarks in the open space. Bernard sat down upon one of them and read his letter through once very slowly. Then he turned back again to the beginning, and read some words over and over again until he began dimly to apprehend their meaning; and when he did apprehend it, the course which things had taken and the motives which had been at work were fully revealed to him. Then it was not as he had imagined—Christina did indeed love some one else. For an instant a pang shot through him,—for an instant only, and then everything else gave way to a nobler, purer feeling of exultation. She had been wrong—cruelly wrong—as regarded his



happiness, but she was not, as she had seemed, heartless, governed by prudential considerations. She had had a battle to fight, and she had been conquered; she had allowed herself to be driven into tortuous paths, but at least she was not incapable of comprehending something higher than temporalities: at least he need not fear that her life would be narrowed so as to suit her creed, her aspirations lowered, and her future a blank.

Bernard stood up and pushed back his hair from his face, and though the tears were in his eyes, he smiled and said, "Thank God," as he stood all alone, shut out from the world in the midst of the busy life in the streets around him. He was only two-and-twenty, and for him there was nothing left of the dream which had made life so beautiful. The spring of his years had passed with its promise and its freshness, but at least there was left to him the knowledge that he had not believed in a delusion; he might still keep the faith which had so nearly been taken from him; and in this moment the

church in which he stood was consecrated by a thanksgiving so unselfish, and a joy so unearthly, as to be near to that with which the angels of God rejoice.

That evening, sitting alone in his little lodging in one of the narrow streets of the town, he wrote to Christina. He was still sorrowful and hopeless so far as his own future was concerned; but the bitterness had been taken from him, and he could write to her as he could not have written to her before.

“DEAR CHRISTINA,

“I have heard, and at last I know—I understand. My life will not be an altogether sad one since you are happy. I thought I could not forgive you, but I forgive you now. Thank God, Christina, that it is not as I thought. Do not let the thought of me bring you nothing but reproach; remember all the happiness you gave me; remember that you have given me more than you can ever take away;

and even in this world there are better things than happiness, and yet I am glad that it has fallen to your lot. God bless you now and always.

“BERNARD OSWESTRY.”

In the meantime at Overton everything was prospering. Mr. North retained but little of his prejudice against the marriage; Mrs. North did not openly express her dissatisfaction; and, now that it was all arranged, Miss Cleasby had reconciled herself with a good grace to what could not be helped. She had desired to prevent it; she was not now assured that it was for her brother's happiness or for Christina's, but she had warned him, and he would not be warned; she had tried to guard Christina, and Christina would not be guarded; and now she had made up her mind that destiny had settled it without any regard to her wishes, and she was anxious to be kind to the girl for Walter's sake, trusting the rest to time. He was pledged to her now, and she had no wish to make him depart from that pledge.

She called at the White House, but Christina was out, and Mr. North less well, and his daughter-in-law with him; so she did not see anyone, but only left a message, hoping that Miss North would come and see her some time; and that same afternoon, Christina, coming in as it was growing dusk, found the message awaiting her, and said that she would go at once. There was still more than an hour before her grandfather's dinner hour, and she felt that she would like to get the meeting over; not that she dreaded it, but she was curious and impatient to see Miss Cleasby again, now that their relative positions had undergone so strange and startling a change.

She went in for one moment just to give her grandfather the newspaper she had procured for him at the village post-office; and then she went across the road, and in at the Park gates and up the hill towards the house.

She remembered how she had left it; how she had said to herself that she would never enter those

doors again : she remembered her first meeting with Miss Cleasby, and how full she had been of excitement and curiosity and uncertainty ; and now she threw back her head a little as she thought how changed it all was. She had not thought as yet of the Park as the home of which she would be mistress ; she was too imaginative to have as yet given much heed to the practical bearings of the position ; but she did think that all this was his, and he was hers.

She rang at the door and asked for Miss Cleasby, and was told that she was at home ; and she knew that the servant had glanced at her with polite interest as he threw open the drawing-room door and announced her to his mistress.

Miss Cleasby was in a low chair by the fire, for the weather was growing chilly, and both she and her brother had been accustomed to warm climates. She looked very comfortable, a novel in her hand, and a little table with a perfect little china tea-service close beside her ; and she did not get up

when she saw it was only Christina, but held out her hands, and drew her down to her and kissed her.

“I am so glad you have come,” she said; “now we can have a little talk all to ourselves. I was so sorry you were out this afternoon. Walter told me all about it, my dear, and I wanted to see you. I don’t want us to be strangers to each other long.”

Christina had sat down by her, and she was leaning lazily back as usual; but she was looking at Christina all the time, rather as if she were a new and interesting study.

“I was not quite pleased, just at first,” Miss Cleasby went on with gentle candour. “But I suppose that wouldn’t have mattered much to you.”

“Not comparatively much,” said Christina, smiling—thinking at that moment that nothing could have mattered except the one thing.

“No, I suppose not,” said Augusta. “Well, it’s the old story; so old that I don’t see why one

should be surprised. You know, Walter and I have been everything to each other, but it wasn't a very bright look-out for him, and of course I expected he would marry some time or other, and I feel nearly sure he could not have done better than he has," Miss Cleasby concluded; and then she took another long considering look at Christina.

There was something about her composed and kindly manner which would have prevented anyone from taking offence. Christina was proud, but her pride did not show itself in over-sensitiveness. She sat there tranquil and happy, with her brilliant eyes gazing far beyond external things into the bright future which was unfolding itself before her.

"And how will you like to make your home at Overton? Are you glad that Walter is settled here,—or would you have liked to go out and see the world?"

"It is a new world to me," said Christina, simply.

"Well, I suppose so," said Augusta. "Poor child, you must have had a dreary existence: after all, I



don't know that new places and external changes have much to do with constituting a really eventful life. We might see more, if we were to travel about in our own minds and a few other people's and study their intricate windings; and we should get into queer places too, I fancy, sometimes; but people think much more of getting over so many square miles, or of reading so many books, than of searching out a few fellow-creatures."

"I should hate to feel I was being studied just for some one's amusement," said Christina.

"Why should you? you can do the same by them, —it is a mutual advantage."

"I don't think so. I don't care to know about people at all, unless I like them."

"Ah, that is a very youthful creed," said Miss Cleasby. "You have yet to learn how dependent we are upon each other. You think that you could have done very well without me; but all the same it is better that we should be friends, and I am glad that you are so pretty!"

Christina was still sitting in her hat and feather, with her cloak a little thrown back, and her delicately made hands clasped together in her lap ; and she was looking her prettiest, with the light in her eyes and her masses of brown hair hanging loosely about the lovely contour of her face. She was not the least embarrassed by Augusta's remark, for of course she knew quite well that she was beautiful ; and it was only Captain Cleasby's acknowledgment of the fact which concerned her very much.

"I am glad 'too," she said, and laughed.

And after that, they drew together, as girls do draw together, and grew intimate, and talked happily for a little longer ; and then Christina remembered her grandfather's dinner, and went away with a sense that something had been added to her life : she had known so few girls, and though Miss Cleasby was a good deal older than she was, they had met, as it were, upon equal ground, and there was no reason why they should not be friends.

Captain Cleasby came in half an hour afterwards,

and was more vexed than his sister thought natural at finding that he had missed Christina's visit. He only brightened into pleased interest when she spoke warmly in her praise and admired her beauty.

"I am so glad you have taken to her," he said; "I thought you could not help it. Did you ever see anything more perfect than her smile?—it lights up her whole face: the suddenness of it is so peculiar, it comes with such a flash, and then fades away quite slowly. I knew if you had any prejudices left they must vanish when you saw more of her."

"The prejudices were not personal to her, Walter: and don't suppose that I have contrived to find out all about her already. I acknowledge her charm, of course, but I don't know any more than you do about her other qualities. Has she any education, or accomplishments, or money, or connection? I don't want to be discouraging; only I was wondering if you had thought any of these things worthy of your consideration."

"Certainly not," answered Captain Cleasby, quietly;

“these things, my dear Augusta, are all very well in their way, but they are not what I require in my wife. Defend me from your scientific educational women, who are for ever forcing information down your throat, and think the arts of dress and conversation are quite beneath their notice. Christina understands what you mean before you have spoken ; she throws a fresh light upon everything she looks at ; she is not the least afraid of being ignorant, and doesn’t know what moral cowardice is. I don’t know what more you can want. As to accomplishments, of course she has never been in the way of them. The money would have been welcome enough if she had had it—it looks uncommonly like my being done out of my patrimony by these plausible gentlemen in London, who are for ever writing to me, in that mystic tone peculiar to the profession of the law, about things I don’t understand ; and I have no particular fancy for love in a cottage—but she hasn’t got it, so there is an end of the matter. I don’t think even you would have supposed

me qualified for an heiress-hunt. To begin with, I should never have had the energy."

"Nor the enthusiasm about your object. It has been your way to wait under the trees for the fruit to fall. If I am inclined to be sorry about it, it is not because of any mercenary designs that I have formed. As it is done, you know, I mean to like it; but still, I can't help thinking, why did you do it? what was it for? She was going to be married so comfortably to the Curate."

"For whom she didn't care a straw," interrupted her brother.

"I really don't see that that was our affair," said Augusta, disconsolately; "and now you have taken all the responsibility upon your shoulders,—you who know nothing really of what you are undertaking! You have known her four or five months; you have found out that she has a lovely smile and splendid eyes, and holds her head like seven duchesses—and so you make her throw over that nice, sensible curate for you!"

“Let that nice, sensible curate alone, my dear Augusta; he has fortitude enough for anything,—your mind runs too much upon him, and just now I want you to devote your whole attention to the hero and heroine of this little drama—that is to say, to me and Christina. For whose sake is it that you deplore our engagement, hers or mine?”

“It is just this, Walter,” said Miss Cleasby, sitting upright with her hands clasped round her knees, and looking into the fire: “it is just this—that it is an unequal bargain. She was going to marry Mr. Warde, and she had a fair chance of happiness. I don’t suppose they either of them cared much, but people marry on that sort of foundation every day, and mutual respect grows, and they shake down into each other’s ways, and no harm comes of it. That would have been all fair enough, and each side would have known what to expect. But see how different it is now. She loves you, poor child, and thinks you all that is heroic; and you have winning ways, Walter—” She stopped a

moment, and looked at him as he stood before her leaning one arm upon the marble chimney-piece, with the glowing firelight full on his graceful figure and fair, distinguished face; and then she went on: "You have been making love to her, and she believes in it; but a delusion cannot last for ever, and when she finds out that she has made a mistake, how will it be? You cannot, do what you will, make the awakening other than bitter. She is in love with you, poor child, and I don't say it has been altogether your fault—I suppose there is sometimes a fatality about things; but how will it be when she finds you have married her out of pity, when all the time she was thinking that you loved her?"

Captain Cleasby was very cool and self-possessed, but he had still the sort of sensitiveness which made him colour at his sister's words. She was surprised as she noticed the sudden flush which rose to his face; and then he came and knelt down by her, and put his arms round her as he had been used to do in



his caressing boyish days. His face was close to hers now, and he was looking full at her with his candid grey eyes.

“You think badly of me still, Gusty,” he said almost coaxingly.

“Not badly, Walter, only I wish that you loved her.”

“Upon my soul I do.”

There was a silence: his words had carried conviction with them. They were earnest and even impassioned in their brevity. His sister did not speak in answer, but she took his face between her hands and kissed him.

## CHAPTER XVI.

THAT same evening, after dinner, in spite of his sister's remonstrances, Captain Cleasby walked down the hill to the White House in the pouring rain. It was blowing hard, and he was never very strong, or proof against a wetting, and she did all she could to keep him at home; but he laughed at her fears, said he must inquire after Mr. North, and would not be deterred.

He was putting on his coat in the hall, and humming "*Vedrai carino*" softly to himself, when the evening letters were brought in, but he only glanced at the business-like looking covers, and put his head in again at the drawing-room door to say—

"My dear Augusta, would it amuse you to open my letters and answer them for me? I don't want

you to be dull, but I am afraid I shall not be back for an hour and more."

Then he tramped across the hall, and out into the driving storm, wondering a little at himself. He was naturally indolent and disinclined to exert himself either for his own advantage or for other people's : he was considerate and unwilling to give pain ; his manners were gentle and courteous, and his affection for his sister deep and sincere. In general he was too indifferent as regarded other people to be either exacting or sensitive ; his personal interests were not many ; but, on the other hand, his toleration was almost universal. Hitherto there had been nothing for which he would willingly have made a great sacrifice ; and now he was surprised at himself as he became conscious that a change had passed over him. Christina had awakened a new feeling within him : he had told his sister, and truly, that he loved her.

And it was new to him to feel that there was something of real consequence to him. It was not that he had hitherto been absorbed in his own

ambition or gratification, for he was neither selfish nor ambitious ; it was simply that nothing had appeared of much importance to him hitherto, and now life wore a new aspect : the view was widening ; it was the same world upon which he looked, but it seemed larger, for he saw it with different eyes. As he had said to Christina, it was a new heaven and earth to him.

There was a light burning in Mr. North's study, and he thought that Christina would have heard his knock and would have come out to the door ; but the house seemed very still, and it was Janet who came to let him in.

There was no welcome in Janet's face ; but she asked him to walk into the parlour, and she would tell Miss North.

"Is she with her grandfather ?" he asked ; "perhaps I ought not to disturb her."

"No, she isn't with Mr. North," Janet answered rather crossly. Bernard had been her favourite, and she had guessed more than anyone else of what

his hopes had been ; and now she could not be gracious to his rival : and then she added, not without a certain grim satisfaction in dealing what she conceived would be a blow to his pride, that Miss Christina had been doing up some arrowroot for her grandfather's supper, and she had stopped by the kitchen fire to warm herself a bit.

"Oh ! in the kitchen, is she ?" said Walter : and then he laid his hand upon the handle of the door, and had shut it behind him, leaving the discomfited Janet in the passage outside, before she had time to make any remonstrance. She did not dare to follow, but went away grumbling into the back regions.

Christina was sitting on a low stool by the fire, with her head resting upon her hands. There were traces of tears upon her face, and her eyes looked sad and troubled. So absorbed was she in her own thoughts, that Captain Cleasby had come in and had stood for a moment looking at her before she was aware of his presence, and even when she saw

him she did not seem for an instant to realize it. She gave him no greeting, but sat there, still looking at him half vacantly and half bewildered. It was the first time that Walter had not found everything give way to him ; it was the first time that she had not brightened and flushed at his approach ; and it gave him a slight unreasonable shock to find that she was capable of being so occupied, by something of which he knew nothing, as not to know that he was in the room. Yet it was but an instant ; the look of comprehension returned, and she started up with the exclamation, "Walter, is it you? I did not expect—I did not know you for the minute ; I was thinking of something else."

"So I perceived," said Captain Cleasby ; "and I walked in just at the right moment to call back your thoughts into their proper channel. Where have they been wandering."

He spoke lightly, but, looking at her steadily as he spoke, he saw that again her eyes had filled with tears, and his tone changed in a moment.

“What is it, dearest?” he said fondly, kneeling down by her. “You know you have no secrets from me. What has been troubling you?”

“The ghosts of my faults, I think,” she said. “Oh, Walter,” she went on hurriedly, “I ought to have told you before. I thought of it, and then I seemed too happy to do anything which might break the charm. But I must say it now; no,”—as he would have spoken,—“I want to say it now—don’t interrupt me—don’t speak before you know.” And then she stood up and drew herself away from him. “Before Mr. Warde spoke to me, before you came to Overton, I was engaged to be married to my cousin, Bernard Oswestry.” She paused a moment; then, as he made no answer, she went on: “No one knew of it but ourselves; we did not expect to be able to marry for a long time, and grandpapa would not have liked it. It was not Bernard’s fault that it was kept a secret—nothing has been his fault; it was all mine. I was very cruel to him. When I found I could not marry



him, I could not write or do anything to make it better—and he heard it through his mother.”

She had spoken distinctly, but rapidly and low; and now she paused to take breath, feeling as if she had made the revelation and taken the fatal step, and had nothing to do but to await the consequences. She had not known how much it would cost her. She had so long accustomed herself to look upon her engagement to Bernard and her conduct towards him as something exclusively their own, that in the first bewilderment of her happiness she had thought of him with a compassionate regret and deep self-reproach, without considering whether Captain Cleasby had not a right to be told of what had been between them, and without taking into account the effect that the knowledge might have upon him. Now for the first time she had felt herself moved to confession from the very consciousness of the fear which was strengthening itself each moment as to the issues of her confession.



That fear grew stronger as she waited for his answer ;—it was pressing upon her heart and stifling more words. Could she a second time ask him for forgiveness? Could he be expected to forgive? Yet her attitude was not that of a suppliant. She stood erect ; she did not look at him, but her eyes were not cast down. If he wished for freedom, he should be free. She would do nothing to make him think that she could not 'live without him—that she was trembling as she waited for his words.

“And when did this little episode take place?” he said coldly, breaking the silence.

“We were engaged a year ago,”—and she, too, spoke calmly.

“And when did you discover your inability to fulfil your engagement?”

She might have said that it was when she first knew him, when she first could no longer hope to give Bernard that for which he had waited, when she made up her mind that she could not go to him with a lie upon her lips. But some-

thing held her back, and she could not speak of this.

"We parted at the time I became engaged to Mr. Warde. I was at that time engaged to Bernard."

"You engaged yourself to Warde at the same time that you were promised to your cousin!" he said, roused to severity. "You did not even break with him first! and when you had been bound to him for a year! I do not wish to ask what, perhaps, I have no right to know, what concerns him only, but how am I to understand you? I had thought, Christina, that you could not deceive; and now your past is so full of complications that I cannot comprehend it. I cannot reconcile you to your past."

Christina sat down wearily, but she made no answer. She could not frame excuses, nor put together extenuating circumstances.

"I could understand your engagement to Warde," he went on: "your grandfather wished it; you liked and respected him; there was nothing to

draw you back, there was no call to deceive, there was everything to make you think it a duty to accept him ; and when I had spoken, you could no longer hold to that, and everything altered by no fault of your own. But then, how am I to understand your breaking with your cousin ? Had you no heart to see what you were doing ? Why should you have deliberately wrecked the poor boy's happiness ? ”

Her whole being, mental and physical, was strained to the effort to abstain from tears. She would not move him by any cry or sign of weakness ; she would not, if she could help it, even plead in her own defence. As of old, her pride and independence kept her silent.

“ Have I been hard ? ” he said. “ If I have, remember why, Christina. Remember it is because to me it is everything to know that I have not trusted you in vain. I do not want to be hard to you, but I must know ; you must tell me that I may trust you, and then I will ask you no more

about the past. Put your hands in mine, Christina, and say, 'Walter, I am true'—then I ask no more."

"I am, I am,—I meant to be," she said through her tears, which could no longer be repressed.

"Then why did you get into these entanglements?" he said, more softly, keeping the hands which she had held out to him still clasped in his. "Or am I to keep my promise and ask no more?"

"You may ask," she said; "it is only of me that you can hear any harm. Bernard was everything that was most generous and straightforward. He had wished it—he had thought of it for a long time; and at first he could not—but now he has forgiven me."

"Christina," he said, earnestly, "what I want to know is this—Did you love either of these men?"

"No, I never did—never. I thought I cared for Bernard; I did care for him, and I thought I could be happy with him—but never in that way. He was always good to me,—but no, I never did."

“Then why did you promise to marry him? and why did you break that promise?”

“I did not know when I promised; and then, when I found I could not care for him in the way he wished, I could not tell him, and I could not keep my promise.”

“And so you accepted Warde as a pretext and a way out of the difficulty,” said Walter, slowly, as if a light had dawned upon him. “My poor child, you have gone through a great deal for me.”

“I could not help it,” she said, softly. “I mean I could not have helped the pain to myself; but I could have helped doing wrong. I could have kept from hurting others—and I did not do it. I am sorry,” she said, “I am sorry; but I think I shall be forgiven now Bernard has forgiven me. They had just brought me his letter before you came;” and she held it out to him.

“No, Christina,” he said, putting it gently aside; “no—that was written only for you; it lies between

you and him. I understand it all now, and we need not think any more of the past. But you will allow, my dear Christina," he added, with the rapid transition from earnestness to levity, which was one of his characteristics, "you will allow that the second revelation might naturally have a rather startling effect until one had got at the key to it. I am not afraid, for I know I have you safe; but shall you be sorry to say good-bye to your girlhood, with its freedom and its excitements?"

She shook her head and smiled. Half an hour after he lingered with her by the broad kitchen hearth, whilst the candles burnt lower in the sockets, and the fire flamed and crackled, and the light was reflected in the shining pots upon the shelves, and the shadows changed their places on the wall; and outside, the wind swept round the corners of the house, and rushed rustling through the creepers. Then the clock struck nine, and he knew that he must go, for it was time for Christina to read to her grandfather.

“Oh, Walter, how stormy it is!” she said; but yet she came to let him out herself.

“No, no,” he said, putting her back; “the rain and wind will rush in the moment the door is opened. And one word more, Christina: remember I have nothing to forgive; all that is over. We shall each have something to forgive, perhaps, before long—and then who knows but my shortcomings may outweigh yours. Good-night, my queen. Are you afraid for the future?”

“No!” she said; “no!” and felt, for some reason, as if she were making a promise that, come what might, she would not shrink: but yet what cause had she for fear? It was only that we cannot build except upon what is, and upon what has been,—what is to come must ever be mysterious and uncertain.

He opened the door, and the blast, laden with heavy drops of rain, rushed through the narrow passage: yet she did not shut the door, but stood looking out into the darkness until his footsteps died away.



Miss Cleasby was at her writing-table when he re-entered his drawing-room, with some papers laid out before her, and she did not at once turn to him, nor show any solicitude at his having got wet.

“Well, Gusty,” he said, throwing himself carelessly into an arm-chair, “you seem still in the toils of composition. Were the letters very interesting?”

“They were more than interesting,” said Augusta, turning round. “Walter, what have you been thinking of all this time? Here is Mr. Waltham writing to you about some interest that has to be paid at once. What does it all mean? What is the difficulty of your coming into your property? He writes as if there were all sorts of difficulties rising up. What can be the reason that you, as papa’s heir and his only son, should not inherit his property without all these law difficulties? I know there were debts, but I thought that would make no difference.”

“So old Waltham has been writing again, has



he?" said Captain Cleasby; "I had no idea I was so soon to be honoured by another communication, or, you may be very sure, my dear Augusta, that I would not have troubled you with it. Here—give me the letters, and don't worry yourself about it. I suppose you knew there were debts, and now they have to be paid off, that's all,—and I shan't be quite so rich a man as I might have been."

"Well, I suppose you know about as much about it as I do—that is to say, next to nothing. I do wish, Walter, you would write to Uncle Robert, or consult some one. Here, you see, Mr. Waltham is going out of town for some weeks, so I suppose it is not much use going to him."

"No, thank goodness!" said Walter, glancing at the letter; "now I shall have a little peace and quiet. At least three weeks before I need think of London, or lawyers, or settlements!"

Thus it was that he put the matter aside, and, though his sister continued anxious, she knew that

it was of no use to press him further. And in the sunshiny, peaceful time which followed, she, too, almost forgot that there were any clouds upon the horizon.

Christina North had known happiness before. In the midst of her dreary girlhood there had been days and weeks in which she could forget her cares and troubles in the natural and spontaneous happiness of youth, in a passing enthusiasm, or in glimpses of something higher and more lasting; but *this* happiness she had never known. The quiet September sunshine seemed to have found its way into her heart. She was softened and repentant, but having made free confession, memory could no longer weigh her down by the burthen of an unforgiven past; she could never undo what she had done: she could never restore what she had taken away; but remorse had given way to penitence, and the oppressiveness and the dread had left her.

The delay in the settlement of Captain Cleasby's affairs would involve the postponement of their

marriage, but at this time they neither of them remembered to regret it. In the freshness of each succeeding dawn ; in the awakening to recollections of the past day as bright as the thoughts of the day to come ; in the morning spent at the Park, sometimes on the lawn, sometimes in the library over the books ; in the afternoons when they loitered in the lanes, or Captain Cleasby and his sister sketched whilst Christina looked on ; in the soft hour of autumn twilight, and the long evenings which Walter would spend in Mr. North's study, devoting himself to amuse and interest the old man,—in all this, what room was there for regret ?

There was nothing to disturb the peace, or throw a shadow over the happiness of the time. Walter was gentle and devoted, and Christina trusted him entirely. She was neither cultivated nor accomplished, but her quickness in apprehending what was put before her, and in grasping new ideas, charmed and interested him. His education, although desultory, had not been narrow, and his mind, though

somewhat indolent, was of a speculative and intellectual type; in his sister he had been accustomed to find a congenial intellectual companion and an equal antagonist; so that it had not been without reason that she had feared that in marrying a girl incapable of appreciating his tastes or entering into his interests, he might have found much to miss and to desire. But with Christina she now saw that this would never be the case. She was ignorant, of course, but then she was not in the least ashamed of her ignorance, and she was quite ready to form her own opinions and to maintain them; and her readiness and freshness were such as to surprise and interest anyone. Indeed, the flaw in the connection between her and Walter had always been that he looked upon her as an interesting study and as a charming picture, rather than as one whose dependence on him involved grave responsibilities, and upon whose human and immortal nature his influence for good and evil, for sorrow or happiness, was seriously powerful. He liked to use his power, he

liked to bring out new expressions, and to watch her varied moods; he liked to put new things before her, and to watch her as fresh lights burst upon her, and unaccustomed subjects were brought to view; but as yet he was apt to regard her as a plaything (precious beyond all else), living and moving, and responsive to his touch, but still a plaything, and, as such, to be loved and cared for.

It was the one thing which his sister would have liked to alter; and it did not affect Christina, for she was unconscious of it. She could have held back nothing: she had given herself; her contentment was perfect, and her confidence complete. She believed what he had told her, and was neither unsatisfied nor exacting.

So those weeks were free from all misunderstandings or quarrels, and as uneventful as happiness could make them.

People were sorry for Mr. Warde; and at first there was much surprise expressed when Captain

Cleasby's engagement to Christina became known ; but after a time it began to be said that certainly it was for the best. She was evidently unsuited for a clergyman's wife ; and, after all, Captain Cleasby's age was more suitable to hers. She ought to have known her own mind sooner, but then she was young, and, no doubt, had been pressed into accepting Mr. Warde ; or at any rate it seemed that she really cared for this young man, as she had held to him against her grandfather, who, as everyone knew, was such a fierce old man, that most people were quite afraid of him.

Good-natured people, who tried to make the best of things, talked in this way when the matter was discussed ; and others, who were more disposed to be hard upon Christina, made up their minds that it would be for their interest to continue upon good terms with the Cleasbys, since their house would be a pleasant one, and their dinner-parties an enlivenment to the neighbourhood. They said

also that Christina could not have been so very much in fault, or Mr. Warde would not have still continued to be a constant visitor at the White House.



## CHAPTER XVII.

IT was quite true that, as the neighbours remarked, Mr. Warde continued to keep up a constant and friendly intercourse with the Norths. Indeed, just at this time, when Mr. North was still so far from well, his visits to the White House were even more frequent than usual. He did not seek Christina, but they met occasionally, as was natural, and his manner was always the same kindly and even affectionate one, and so entirely free from any resentment or embarrassment, that she could almost forget, while in his presence, that their present friendly relations had ever undergone a change. She was grateful to him, and she felt that he had had cause for resentment; but she could not help



thinking that he had by this time found out that their engagement had been a mistake on his side as well as upon hers, and she would not join in her mother's compassionate lamentations over him.

"No, he *was* very much to be pitied," she said ; "but that was when he was engaged to me. I know it was very kind of him, and he had a right to be very angry ; but at the same time there is no reason to pity him, because he is free. We should never have been happy."

Her mother did not agree with her ; and, strange as it may seem, though she did not share her father-in-law's violent prejudices, she was almost as averse to Christina's engagement as he was himself. She could not disabuse herself of the idea that it could not and would not prosper. Captain Cleasby might mean well, but who could tell what might not happen to make him change his mind ? It had been so sudden, and she could not trust him as she trusted Mr. Warde. She valued riches, and position, and the good things of the world ;

she would have rejoiced that Christina should have had them in moderation ; but the idea of her becoming the mistress of the Park was to her mother's mind so unnatural as to seem almost impossible. She had understood Mr. Warde, but she could not understand Captain Cleasby ; thus it was that Mrs. North refused to be satisfied. Christina had thrown away what she considered her best chance of happiness, and she would not be persuaded that it would not have been for his good also ; and as to his being relieved at her playing him false, how could she know anything about it ? A man could not grow pale and thin, and bemoan himself like a girl !

“ Nor can he come and say, ‘ You disappointed me at the time, but after all I believe I do much better without you,’ ” Christina had answered, rather impatiently : and then she went away, and the conversation was broken off ; but Mrs. North remained unconvinced.

As has been said, Overton generally had re-

conciled itself to Christina's inconstancy, and the Rector's looks and manners were just what they always had been, and were not at all such as to excite compassion. He was very busy, and he went about his work among his parishioners in his energetic cheerful way, setting his mind to solve their practical difficulties and supply their physical wants, as if he had no cares or regrets of his own to claim precedence. He was glad to be of any use or comfort to his old friend Mr. North ; and he would not shrink from going to the Park when the occasion offered.

Owing to General Cleasby's long absence, there were many improvements in the parish still required, to which he, as the Squire, ought, as Mr. Warde conceived, to have attended long ago. The church was badly lighted ; the schools needed enlargement ; cottages were falling into ruin ; subscriptions were needed. Captain Cleasby, too careless to be illiberal, had hitherto responded to the various calls upon him, and now there were several points upon

which Mr. Warde desired to ask his advice and his help. He was too simple and straightforward, he had the interests of his flock too much at heart, to be deterred by any false shame or personal resentment. Captain Cleasby had gained what he had lost; in one sense he had been vanquished; but he felt that it was no dishonour to him to be vanquished; and as to Captain Cleasby, he did not attract him, certainly, but yet he wished that Christina might be happy with him.

Captain Cleasby on his part had no cause for resentment. There had always been to his mind something a little ludicrous about his engagement to Christina: it had disturbed him at the time; it had exercised a strong influence upon his conduct; but when once his fears were relieved, he was disposed to look upon it with some amusement, as a preposterous and impossible scheme which could never have been accomplished.

He smiled when he was told Mr. Warde had called to see him, and went into the drawing-room

somewhat interested to see how he would bear himself.

He liked him, and he was disposed to be friendly ; but hitherto there had been on his part a slight sense of superiority over the unpolished country clergyman : it vanished as he remarked the dignified simplicity of his manner, and noticed how naturally and easily he responded to his cordial greeting.

They talked for some time of different things,—of the poor, of education, of the country and the neighbours ; and then Mr. Warde brought out his plans and estimates, and made his request for a subscription.

“I am especially anxious about the lighting of the church,” he said. “If we could have an evening service, I feel sure we could command a good congregation. They like the lights and the warmth, and the mothers can come after the children are gone to bed ; many people would attend whom we cannot get to come in the mornings or afternoons.”

“But from what motives ? I know nothing about

these things, but it would not have occurred to me that gaslights and stoves were fitted to create devotion."

"They are aids," said Mr. Warde seriously. "There are not many people, I fancy, whose motives are altogether unmixed——" He broke off suddenly as Miss Cleasby came in. She had been out riding, and she came in in her hat, with a whip in her hand, and closely followed by her black retriever.

It was the first time that she had chanced to meet Mr. Warde since her brother's engagement, and her usually pale complexion was heightened as she shook hands with him. She was too self-possessed, however, to betray in any other way the touch of shyness she felt under what she conceived must be to him embarrassing circumstances.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything," she said; "you both of you look most decidedly parochial, sitting among blue business papers. I hope Walter is more civil to you than he is to me, Mr. Warde; he always tramples upon me if I venture to ask questions which have any practical bearing."



"Theory is a much prettier thing than practice," said Walter, lazily.

"But a theory is only tested by its result," said the clergyman; "it seems to me it loses its interest if it cannot be made to act."

"Of course it does," said Augusta; "and Walter will not understand that my interest in things is beginning to awaken. I think I have philanthropic tendencies, only they are undeveloped, and I am beginning to comprehend the duties which belong to the Squire's sister. I gave an old man a flannel waistcoat yesterday, and to-day three old men came and asked for three more."

"I am sorry," said Mr. Warde hastily; "I am afraid your kindness may be imposed upon."

"Oh no!" said Augusta, composedly; "they were most deserving cases, and so grateful; but, unfortunately, dear Don, who did not of course know what deserving old men they were, and who, like his mistress, has a rooted dislike to poverty, nearly murdered one of them as he was going away."

“Indeed !” said Mr. Warde, a little taken aback by her manner ; “do you mean the man was seriously hurt ?”

“He was ; but he recovered when I gave him half-a-crown and begged his pardon. Really, if people are respectable, they should not go about looking like vagrants. Don is the most intelligent dog I know, but even he was taken in by the man’s appearance.”

“An appearance probably none the less ragged for the prospect of the flannel waistcoat before him,” said Mr. Warde drily ; “but, Miss Cleasby, if you are really anxious to do something for the people, you may be of the greatest service. There are so many parts of the work which can be better done by a lady than by a man, and we have so little assistance of the kind :” and for the first time he hesitated, remembering how recently he had hoped to have Christina’s help.

“I shall be very happy,” began Augusta ; and then she caught her brother’s eye and could not



help laughing. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Warde," she said, "but my brother, I see, thinks it absurd for me to make promises. You see, we have never been brought up to this sort of thing. If the people want to be fed and clothed, I can understand it—and if you will send them up here for soup and blankets, I shall be very glad—but when it comes to talking to them, it is beyond me. I was very much edified by those pious old men this morning, and then you come and throw suspicion upon their veracity, and seem to think that Don's well-meant interference was not uncalled for. Then, if *I* am to do the talking, instead of listening humbly to what they tell me, it is still more perplexing—you might as well set me to talk to Hottentots in their own language!"

"*That* declaration has at any rate the merit of sincerity," said Captain Cleasby.

"I am sorry to hear it," said Mr. Warde. "It seems to me that whatever raises a barrier between classes is both sad and culpable. How can you

expect the poor to respect your wishes and your interest when you look upon them as another order of beings?"

"I never thought about them," said Augusta, as if excusing herself; "I don't look upon them as anything at all."

"That is your mistake," he said; but though he was very much in earnest, his gravity relaxed a little.

"Yes, you say it is our mistake," said Captain Cleasby; "but can you tell us why and how it should be otherwise? We do not need to be told that to you *your* duties are full of interest; but can you say what constitutes the bond of union? You baptize their children, you marry and bury them, but what is there beyond?" It was not so much the desire to be instructed which made him ask the question—he could himself have answered it in a dozen different ways—but he wanted to hear what the man would say for himself: his sphere had been narrow enough, and he had no great

opinion of his abilities; but he was so different from the people with whom he was accustomed to exchange ideas, that he was curious to hear what he would say.

"They are my flock," said Mr. Warde; "they are human beings with immortal souls."

"You are better than we are," said Augusta, softly. And though Mr. Warde's manner of speech sounded rather strange to them both, there was something that impressed them in the ardent truthfulness of his answer. Soon after Walter was called away, but Mr. Warde sat a little longer with his sister.

"Perhaps I may reform in time," she said, as he took his leave, "and come and hear your little boys their multiplication tables, when I have learnt them myself; but I feel rather discouraged by your condemnation of my first little effort in the path of active benevolence: I thought at least my poor flannel waistcoats could do no harm, and I was so glad to find they were so pleased with them—and now it seems they are nothing but a temptation."

"The intention at least was praiseworthy," said Mr. Warde, as he opened the door.

"He talks to me as if I were a little girl making a blot on my first copy!" said Augusta to herself. She was amused, but yet she liked him; it was curious, but it was impressive, to see a man who had so little of the hero or of the conventional saint about him, yet whose whole course of life was one of self-denying effort for the good of his fellow-creatures. She felt that all his energies were directed into that channel, and that they had not been without fruit even in the sentiments of respect that they had awakened in her own mind. "It does one good to look up to something worth looking up to," she said to herself; and she was pleased to find that she was capable of appreciating such worth with so little of sentiment or external charm attached to it.

At this time she had bestowed little attention upon the consideration of her own future. Walter had asked her to make her home with them, but she would not. She declared that they would be

better without her, and she would not consent to be in their way. No ; she had several long-postponed visits to pay, and then she would look about for some little cottage where she could settle near them. She liked to have a home of her own, and she would have ample means to enable her to live comfortably, and to receive her guests, and she would not, after all, be at home for much of the year. She had so many friends who wanted her to come to them,—but she would not be dependent on anyone. So she said, and her brother at last agreed with her. Of course she could not be to Christina what she was to him, and those complicated family arrangements he allowed were often mistakes. So it was settled ; indeed, if she had been at all inclined to be jealous, she might already have become so. Christina was naturally his first thought. The long mornings he had been used to spend with his sister were devoted to her ; the discussion of present affairs and future plans was often cut short ; and although he was kind and gentle as ever, of course she felt the difference. But

by no word or look would she show that she felt it : she rejoiced in their happiness, and would not do anything to mar it ; she even made friendly advances to Mr. North. Unknown to him, everything that could possibly tempt his failing appetite was sent to him from the Park. She told Christina she had fallen in love with her aunt Margaret, only she wished that handsome son of hers would come home ; and, finally, she gave a large dinner-party, a thing which she particularly detested, in order to introduce Christina to the neighbourhood, and show how cordially she accepted her as a sister-in-law. Mrs. North sent her with Mrs. Oswestry, making the excuse that she could not leave her father-in-law for so long a time. In fact, poor woman, she dreaded making her appearance among them all after so many years of seclusion ; and her dresses were old-fashioned and shabby. But Christina never thought of these things ; her mother said she believed, if she was asked to meet the Queen, she would not be afraid of doing anything wrong, or of not saying



the right things; and as for her dress at this dinner at the Park, she merely remarked that Walter liked her crimson ribbons, and seemed to think the matter ended there, though even Miss Cleasby had taken the trouble to wonder if she had any evening dress. However, Mrs. North's fears and laments, reaching Mrs. Oswestry's ears, were soon after silenced by the arrival of a white silk dress of her own, worn once during her six months of married life, and then laid aside for ever.

Mrs. North exclaimed at its beauty, and set to work to adapt it with almost cheerful alacrity. She would dress Christina with her own hands when the evening came; and as she looked at her daughter standing before her with the folds of shining silk falling around her graceful figure, and the crimson knots of ribbon in her waves of brown hair, and the smile of happy anticipation upon her parted lips, it seemed as if for the first time she was able to take a mother's pride in her beauty.

"It might have been different, Christina," she

said ; "you are only going to what should have been your home, but it does not matter as much now ; and whoever they may have there, there will be no one to compare with you to-night."

"Why, mother, it is nothing but my fine clothes," said Christina, laughing a little as she kissed her.

Then she went in to her grandfather, and he too looked at her with pleasure and pride.

"Good night, grandpapa," she said ; "you will miss your reading to-night, but you won't mind, will you? because I shall be able to tell you all about everything to-morrow."

"I don't know about hearing about everything, as you call it," said Mr. North. "I'm not too fond of hearing of all the silliness that goes on in the world ; but I suppose you like it, and so I'm pleased that you should go and see what it's like for yourself. Dust and ashes look very pretty at a distance sometimes, I know."

"Yes, grandpapa," said Christina, standing at the



door just before she turned to go; "yes, but it's too soon to talk of dust and ashes. Even you will let me have a little pleasure first, won't you, grandpapa?"

## CHAPTER XVIII.

THERE was a buzz of talk going on in the Cleasbys' drawing-room ; the gentlemen were standing about on the hearthrug, and the ladies were grouped together discussing their doings of the past day without much help from their hostess, when Mrs. Oswestry and Christina were announced. There was an effort made on the part of the other guests not to show any special interest, nor betray their consciousness that Christina's presence was to be accounted for by the event which had entirely revolutionized her prospects ; but, in spite of their appearance of well-bred indifference, Christina could not help feeling that they were sitting in judgment upon her, and that their verdict would be delivered that night.

This was not an occasion upon which she was likely to lose her self-possession. Walter had met her at the door; and although he did not remain near her, the consciousness of his presence had overpowered all else. She was ready to talk when Miss Cleasby made her known to some of the older and more aristocratic ladies, and she was not in the least embarrassed by their kind but somewhat patronizing manner, nor by the inspection to which their daughters subjected her, looking at her from under their eyelids, measuring her height, and wondering how she did her hair. She was not shy, because she was too proud to be very anxious to please.

Mr. Warde arrived last, looking rather out of place, some people thought, among the well-dressed guests and the gilded furniture; but he, like Christina, was conscious of no social deficiencies, and to no one had the hostess' manner been more warm and unconstrained. Dinner was announced, and Walter, inwardly pitying himself, walked off

with Lady Bassett, whilst Christina was allotted to young Mr. Creed. It was a large dinner-party, like most country dinner-parties, to which people come five or six miles, chiefly because they are asked and have nothing better to do ; not for the sake of much pleasure to themselves or others. Though there was no lack of talk, and both the host and hostess were young and clever and could be agreeable when they chose, it was in fact a sufficiently dull entertainment. Not that it appeared so to Christina ; it was all new to her, and she was young and happy and ready to be amused.

There was music in the evening. The young people clustered round the pianoforte and sang together. Christina sat in the background on a low chair, leaning against the crimson curtains. She had laughed and talked. Her eyes had brightened, and her cheeks had flushed with excitement ; but now she was still and silent, listening to the music as in a dream.

“That is a pretty girl,” said Admiral Creed to

old Miss Westburne, the rich maiden lady of the neighbourhood, a rather censorious person of whom everybody was more or less afraid. "She has beauty enough for ten; upon my word, I don't wonder at Cleasby."

"Do you ever wonder at anyone?" asked Miss Westburne, with a little sourness in her voice. "For my part I have left off wondering long ago. People used now and then to do something sensible and take one by surprise; but it is not the way of the present generation. As to Captain Cleasby, I am sure I don't wish to blame him; I suppose he has a right to judge for himself, and if he is foolish, so are other young men."

They were sitting upon an ottoman in a recess of the room, and both music and talk were going on round them, yet Admiral Creed felt apprehensive of being overheard, and hastened to change the subject.

"What has become of young Oswestry?" his son was saying to Mr. Sim, the architect; "I

thought he worked with you ; but I see that his mother is here and he is not."

"No, no, he left Overton some time ago," Mr. Sim answered ; "he took a fancy for a change. I used to think that he would have turned out a first-rate man ; but he grew restless, and now I imagine that he is an anxiety to his mother."

"Mrs. Oswestry," said Augusta, in a low voice, bending down to her as she spoke, "look at Christina ; what can she be thinking of?—what has come over her?"

Christina was sitting exactly where she had been when Admiral Creed called attention to her ; but the excitement and happiness had died out of her eyes. They were fixed upon the distance with a look of dreamy regret, and her hands lay listlessly in her lap.

She had caught a part of Mr. Sim's speech ; but it was not that which had wrought the change. No ; it was only that some one was singing an old song which Bernard had sung long ago. There

was nothing in the words, but they came to her laden with the memory of the past :—

“ Is it to try me  
That you thus fly me?  
Can you deny me  
Day after day? ”

Again she saw him, standing under the apple-tree at the Homestead, and singing it to her, half in jest, one day when she had been capricious and uncertain. How near they had been to each other, and what an impassable gulf lay between them now! He had said that he forgave her, but never again could they be as they had been; never could the old days of childish fondness and youthful friendship return. She thought of him now, saddened and restless, and her heart failed her, with a sense of what she had done and of the irrevocableness of the past. She knew that to-night she had been courted and admired; she knew that it was but the beginning of what her life would be; that, for her, love and wealth would do all which they



could do to make her happy ; that in a few weeks or months she would be transplanted into this new region, and she would leave behind the old days of weariness and struggling poverty ; and with this leave also all that belonged to Bernard—all that belonged to that time,—the charm of their familiar intercourse and the bond of affectionate friendship.

“Are you tired?” It was Walter’s voice which roused her from her dream. She started, and coloured with a sense of ingratitude at having for a moment forgotten him. His voice at once recalled her to the present. They were singing a war march, and her regrets were drowned in its noisy triumph. When Miss Cleasby looked at her the next moment, she was smiling and playing with a rose which Walter had given her. So it is with our thoughts which we flash for a moment before each other’s eyes : in a passing impulse or a pang of regret we let the truth shine forth ; but perhaps it dies within ourselves,—at least it

dies to other eyes before they can fathom its meaning.

For the time she thrust memory aside ; but in the darkness and silence of the night, again it put the past before her. It was not that she could have been content to part with what she had gained ; it was not that she could have renounced the present, to which Walter Cleasby belonged. She knew that she was happier than she had ever hoped to be ; yet at this moment of the accomplishment of her own desire, regret for what she had lost would still find a place. It was only the natural longing which rises in our human hearts for that which time or circumstance, or even our choice, has put beyond our reach. It was only because we treasure the remembrance of the places which we may never see again ; of the hands which may clasp ours no longer ; of the words which may never be repeated ; of the love which may never be expressed : it is all dear to us still ; it is laid up in our hearts with the tender memories of childhood. True, we are richer, happier, and content with what

we have ; more has been added year by year of knowledge and friendship and love. What we have may be a compensation—it may be more than a compensation ; but what is lost is gone, and to replace is not to restore. The print of the Saviour which hangs over the nursery chimney-piece is no longer our ideal of divine beauty ; but which of Raphael's most wonderful conceptions can ever, in the same way, represent the material part of our faith ? The tones of the old parish organ are neither so rich nor so powerful that they cannot easily be surpassed ; yet with what other instrument shall we ever again hear the angelic voices blending ? Thus it is that, look onward as we may to a future illuminated by hope, we must still have yearnings towards the past and lost.

Christina could not at times refuse to remember ; but yet each day was beautiful, and she was living in a wonderful dream of mysterious happiness. Only if Walter need not go away ! It was a month since his engagement, nearly the end of October ; Mr. Waltham

had returned to town, and he had no longer any excuse for lingering at Overton.

“You see, Christina,” he said, “we shall never be married, unless I go away to get these things settled. It would never do for us to be married, and then have the worry of settlements afterwards. Besides, I am not sure that your grandfather yet reposes in me all the confidence I deserve, and I don’t believe he would allow it.”

“I don’t care so very much about being married,” said Christina perversely. Captain Cleasby laughed ; but he went away, though complaining of the fate which made a man inherit landed property whether he liked it or not.

When he was gone, Christina went back to her old way of life, and everything, except herself, seemed to be unchanged. There were the hours of attendance upon her grandfather ; there were the busy mornings, the silent evenings and solitude as of old ; but these things could not affect her now. A wonderful feeling of repose had come over her. It seemed that her

future lay plain before her, and that happiness was waiting for her there. She was too young and too sanguine to be anxious; she was too trusting to be disturbed by fears. Walter had taken her fate into his hands, and she was ready to confide it to him. It was not that even now she imagined that he loved her as she loved him; but she could not upon that account keep back anything of what she had to give. Happiness had not made her impatient; she was content to wait; and in the meantime she rested in her faith.

Miss Cleasby came often to the White House; she had made friends with Mr. North, and she told Mr. Warde that she had chosen him for the object of her Christian charity, in preference to going among the poor people whom she could not understand. Nevertheless, she did one day visit the school, turned Don in among the children, and succeeded in creating a general disturbance, of which she was, however, apparently so innocent a cause, and for which she apologized so meekly, that even Mr. Warde, who

could not suspect it of being intentional, saw no ground for just reproof, and could only concur in her declaration that she was really unfitted for parochial duties. He thought it was a pity ; for when she did undertake any office of kindness, he was struck by the tact and good-will with which she carried it out. In spite of her lazy indifferent manner, her servants and the few of her inferiors with whom she came in contact were all devoted to her, and with Mr. North she had gained, in spite of his prejudices, an influence which excited everyone's astonishment. He delighted in her conversation, made her invariably welcome, and seemed to forget his dislike to her family when she was spoken of.

Ten days had passed since Captain Cleasby left Overton. He had written frequently both to his sister and to Christina, but with little mention of his plans or doings : only he said he was longing to get out of London ; there was hardly anyone in town, and he was intensely bored ; but the lawyers were so dilatory that he could not get away. Then at last



there came a letter to his sister, saying that he intended to come home by the last train on the following day ; but he did not wish Christina to be told. "It will be so late that I shall not be able to see her until the morning," he wrote, "and she would only worry herself if she knew that I was in the place."

Augusta was surprised. It was true that he would not reach home until between nine and ten in the evening ; and, in Mr. North's present state of health, it would no doubt be better that he should not at that hour disturb the household at the White House ; but yet it seemed to her that the secrecy he enjoined was unnatural, and the caution unnecessary. She went down to the White House in the afternoon with her letter in her pocket ; but finding that though Christina had heard from him that morning, yet she was in complete ignorance of his return being fixed for the same evening, she followed his instructions, and did not enlighten her.

Mr. North was less well that day. Mrs. Oswestry



had been with him, and now she was waiting in the study until the doctor should have paid his visit. Augusta went in and sat down to talk to her. She liked her thoughtful conversation, and took pleasure in her society.

After a time Christina joined them. She threw on some wood, and stirred the fire into a blaze, for it was growing dusk. Augusta took up her hat and talked of going home, but Christina would not let her.

"Wait a little longer," she said; "it will not be much darker than it is now in half an hour's time, and Mr. Warde is with grandpapa now: if you wait until he comes out from his room, he will walk home with you."

"No, thanks," said Augusta, blushing and rising as she spoke. "No, I need not take him out of his way. After all, it is but a step to our own gates."

"I am sure he is in no hurry," began Christina; and just then Mr. Warde entered the room, and she added, "I was asking Miss Cleasby to wait a little,

that you might walk home with her, as it has grown so dark."

"I shall be most happy ; but will you mind waiting for a few minutes, Miss Cleasby ? Dr. Evans has only just gone in to see Mr. North, and I should like to hear what he thinks of him. He seems to me to be very failing to-night."

Augusta acquiesced ; and they sat down in a group before the fire. Perhaps it was the half-acknowledged consciousness that the old man upstairs was slowly approaching his end, perhaps it was the influence of the half-darkened room ; but, as they sat together, a serious and speculative spirit came over their talk.

"And after all we know so little about anything," Augusta was saying ; "we are always groping in the dark, and the worst of it is that we think we have cat's eyes. Of course we go wrong, but then it is our ignorance ; if anyone would give me a candle, I would promise not to stumble half as often 'as I do now."

"But do not people often blow out their candles,

and then complain of the darkness?" asked Mrs. Oswestry.

"Sometimes one would rather be in the dark," said Christina.

There was a pause, and then Mr. Warde joined in the talk.

"What kind of knowledge is it that you desire, Miss Cleasby?" he said.

"Not what people call useful knowledge. It doesn't matter to me whether the sun goes round the earth, or the earth goes round the sun; I never wanted to know the number of the stars, and it would not occur to me to pull a flower to pieces to see how it is made. I like the mystery in which such things are hidden from our profane eyes. But I should like to know just a little about myself and other people. I understand Don; he growls when he is angry, and wags his tail when he is pleased; but if he had a reasoning faculty he would very likely growl when he is pleased and wag his tail when he is angry, just for the purpose of taking

me in. And who is to make a fresh beginning? We can't go back all at once into Paradise, and know each other as Adam and Eve knew each other."

"Not all at once, certainly, Miss Cleasby," said the clergyman; "not all at once, if ever in this world. Can we suppose that perfect sympathy existed after the Fall? It is only the old question of the origin of evil."

"But you will allow it is perplexing. Why do we so easily get out of tune with ourselves and with everything else?"

"There is harmony, nevertheless," said Mr. Warde. He was not accustomed to speak in metaphors, but he was strong in his own belief, and Augusta could not altogether bewilder him. "The notes may seem to jar, but there is harmony in the universe; we are part of the great plan, and even now we can foretell the effect of our actions."

Christina gave a rapid retrospective glance upon her life, and exclaimed against his doctrine.

"No," she said, "it is all unexpected; it is all a surprise. I like not to know what is coming; it is better not to know."

"Well, it is a strange world!" said Augusta. "I wish I could understand it."

"Then where would be the need for faith?" said Mr. Warde; and at that moment Mrs. North interrupted the current of their talk, coming in to tell them the doctor's opinion. He did not apprehend any immediate danger, she said, nor did he see any material change in his patient; but Mr. North was an old man, and no doubt he was failing. There remained nothing to be done, and Miss Cleasby walked up the hill to her house under Mr. Warde's escort in quite as serious a frame of mind as her companion could have desired.

"One cannot help being glad that Christina is not to spend the rest of her life in that dismal house," she said; and then stopped suddenly, remembering that Mr. Warde had no doubt thought of this before, when he had hoped that she would

leave it, but not in the way in which she was leaving it now."

"No doubt one must be glad," he said; and then, as if to relieve her from the awkwardness of having touched, however lightly, upon his private affairs, he pursued the subject: "I am not so selfish as not to rejoice in her happiness," he said; and Augusta perceived with surprise and pleasure that there was nothing of the disappointed lover in his tone; "no doubt it is better as it is, and, in this world, one must lose where another gains."

"Yes, I lose something," said Augusta, skilfully turning the conversation away from him. "It is pleasant to come first with somebody, and until the last month I had held the first place in my brother's thoughts. I don't want to complain, and I know that it is all as it should be; but it feels a little strange and forlorn sometimes."

She turned to him as she spoke, and in the dusky light he could just see her clear grey eyes turned upon him for the first time with a look of appeal;

but he strode on in silence and could make no answer. He was accustomed to hear his poor people's griefs and perplexities and to give them his ready sympathy, joined, as the case might be, with counsel or reproof; but when Miss Cleasby, whom he had always regarded as unapproachably prosperous, unbent so far as to tell him that she too had troubles and privations,—when she turned, to him of all people, to say that it “felt a little strange and forlorn sometimes,” he was for once puzzled, and was not ready, as a clergyman should have been, to improve the occasion.

“What does one do, I wonder, when, as one goes on in life, one's friends drop away, and one's own particular worshipper walks off to worship at another shrine?” said Augusta, thoughtfully; “I am one of your flock, you know, Mr. Warde, and you ought to be able to tell me. Has one to light one's own lamp and put on the fresh flowers for oneself?”

“I suppose that it would not be difficult for most people to find a more worthy object of worship,”



said Mr. Warde ; and then he feared that he had been unkind and severe, and went on, suddenly embarrassed, and hesitating under the difficulty of expressing his meaning. "I understand," he said ; "it must make a great difference to you ; you must of course feel the change. I am sure if I could ever—if I could be of any service to you—I should be very glad if I could do anything."

"Oh yes, thanks," said Augusta ; and she laughed a little softly at his offer, thinking of her own speech a moment before, and wondering if he could mean that he would be ready to kneel at "her shrine," as she had called it ; "but I don't know that you could do anything, and you broad-church people ought to have nothing to do with shrines. Still I will remember, and if I am ever in a difficulty I will certainly look to you as a friend. Good night, Mr. Warde. Thank you so much for bringing me home."

She ran up the steps as the door was opened, and disappeared into the flood of lamp-light which streamed out at it ; and the door was shut upon Mr.

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Warde, and he strode down the hill, more rapidly than he had mounted it, telling himself, as Christina had told herself on that evening in the summer, that he had nothing to do with the Park, and that he would never have anything to do with it. But whilst Christina had cried out, in her girlish impatient way, against the hardness of her fate, he set his face as a man to the work which lay before him, in the cottages on the heath, and in the little village church, and in the hearts of his parishioners. Though a momentary chill had fallen upon him as he turned from the closed door, he had warmed again to his duty before he came out upon the public road.

## CHAPTER XIX.

NINE o'clock had struck a quarter of an hour ago, and Miss Cleasby sat in the drawing-room, waiting for her brother's arrival. She had made the fire burn brightly, and the little round table was laid for their *tête-à-tête* dinner, because she thought that it would look more comfortable than spread in the cold magnificence of the dining-room. She was thinking how nice it would be to have him at home again, and to have him, for one evening at least, all to herself.

"We will have some champagne, Lewis," she had said to the butler, who had lived with them all their lives and had grown into a confidential servant; "we will have some champagne, as Mr. Walter is

coming home." She was quite excited by the prospect of seeing him and of hearing all that he had to tell; and when she heard the sound of wheels she ran out and met him in the hall.

"Walter, how pale you look!" she said, the moment after she had kissed him; "what have you been doing to yourself?"

"Nothing special," he said, rather shortly, and made no response to her affectionate greeting. He threw his hat down upon the table, and busied himself searching for something in his coat pocket.

"Is there anything the matter?" his sister went on, so much struck by his changed looks that she could not help commenting upon them.

"I am cold and hungry, as you would be after a three-mile drive in November. If there is any dinner to be had, suppose you go in to it, instead of staring at me as if I was the tenth wonder of the world." His jaded, irritated tone was so unlike himself, that his sister turned away in silent astonishment; yet the next moment she heard him make

some joking remark to Lewis, and he lingered in the hall playing with the dogs.

She had looked forward to their little social meal as the time when she would hear all his news: the gossip and talk about acquaintances whilst the servants were present, and afterwards the more serious and important part of it. But he was moody and uncommunicative, and her questions seemed to annoy him. He asked for home news, but he did not listen to what she told him. He drank more wine than usual, and she noticed that he hardly touched food; yet when she remonstrated he answered lightly.

"I was not prepared for feasting to such an extent," he said, "and I don't know that I think it is quite delicate of you to celebrate my return in this manner. You know, as an historical fact, it is not the praiseworthy characters who are greeted with turtle-soup and champagne."

"Have you been dining out much in London?"

"Oh yes, occasionally. Would you oblige me by

boxing Don's ears,—or is he allowed to take things off the table?"

"My dear Don," said Augusta, mildly, "you should wait until you are asked."

And so the conversation went on upon trivialities until dessert was upon the table and the servants had left the room.

"I have been a brute, Gusty," said Captain Cleasby, abruptly leaning his arms upon the table and looking over at her; "I have been abominably cross; but when a man is tired and cold, you know——"

"It is not only that, Walter," said Miss Cleasby. She divined that there was something more, and yet she feared to hear her apprehensions confirmed. She felt that she must know, but she put the question falteringly.

"No, it is not only that," said Walter. He rose up as he spoke, and wheeled an arm-chair round in front of the fire, and flung himself into it. "Look here, Gusty," he said; "it is a long story,

and a confused one ; but it must be told some time or another, and I suppose you may as well hear it now."

"Oh, Walter, you have not been getting into some scrape?"

"Why should I?" he said, and laughed a little unsteadily at the idea ; "no, Gusty, it is something rather more serious than that. Do you remember before I went up to London, I think it was a month before, that there was a letter from old Waltham which you opened, and which we could neither of us understand? It was that same day that I heard that he was going out of town, and there was some rigmarole or other about accumulated interest, which was incomprehensible to us both."

"Yes, I remember," said Augusta. As yet it was all vague and uncertain, and she did not know what to expect ; but an undefined fear sent a slight shiver through her frame. Walter saw it, and stretching out his hand clasped one of hers ; it was not a caress, but rather the act of a protector. She



of felt that she was holding her hand as he would have held it had there been some threatening of danger, and he had expected her to feel a shock, and be, perhaps, unnerved.

"That interest which Waltham referred to," said Walter slowly, "was interest which had accumulated upon a mortgage. This estate has been mortgaged for years, and the interest has never been paid."

"I—I don't understand," she said, in her bewilderment. "Why was it mortgaged? Who mortgaged it?"

"My father mortgaged it to a banker in London, Waltham's brother; which accounts for the ambiguous manner in which he has chosen to put the claim before me; for of course the longer an explanation was deferred the more interest there was to be paid. It must have been running on now for twenty years or so. It must have been some years before we went abroad that my father made the arrangement."

"And put this incumbrance upon your inherit-

ance!" said Augusta, indignantly; and she drew her hand out of his and trembled, not, as before, with apprehension, but with a passionate recoil from the injustice: "at least he might have told you, but he never said a word. How could——"

"Hush, Gusty," he said, gently; "you forget, I was a little boy, a sickly little boy; it was not natural that he should think much of my future then: and afterwards—— Well, it could not be undone, and it is not for us to say hard words about the dead. It cannot be helped, and we must meet it as best we can."

There was a silence, and they both sat gazing into the fire—Walter's mind travelling over a thousand different possibilities, seeking, as it had done so often and so wearily, to arrive at some means by which the blow should strike him alone, searching for comfort and finding none. Augusta was absorbed in a dull feeling of present misfortune and a blank dread.

"How far is it involved?" she said at last; "what does it amount to?"

“Do you remember, when we were little children,” he said, “how we used to imagine ourselves poor and working for our daily bread? I was to be a carpenter, I believe, and you were to be my house-keeper. Well, our present situation stops a little short of that; but, when all is paid, there will be but a very few hundreds left. I must look out for something to do, of course; you see I have not even my pay to fall back upon.”

“Oh, Walter, it can't be so bad as that! Are you sure? How is the money to be paid?”

“By the sale of this place, of course. You know you wanted the truth, and I don't see how it can be glossed over. Oh, Gusty! I wish that you had been happily married to some prosperous banker—a worldly man with a town house and a country house cushioned with comfort and luxury. You were meant to be rich, and if he had been a little mercantile and stupid it would not have mattered: you would have represented the taste

and intellect of the family." But Augusta could not respond in the same tone.

"Then we shall have to leave," she said, as if she could as yet hardly comprehend it.

"Yes," he answered; and standing with his back to the fire, leaning against the chimney-piece with his hands in his pockets, he looked at it all:—the row of narrow windows with the velvet curtains drawn over them, the wax lights reflected in the tall mirrors, the gilded furniture shining in the firelight, the family pictures in their frames, the choice old china on the shelves, and the table glittering with plate before him. "Yes, we shall leave our magnificence behind us; there will be no more turtle and champagne for us, Gusty. I don't know that we have played our parts particularly well as the Squire and his sister, but at any rate no one will have to complain of the act as being tediously long."

"It does no good to talk in that way, Walter. What amusement can there be in it? One side of it at least is serious enough."

“And do you suppose I have not looked at it? No, my dear Augusta, I am not such a blind fool. But of what use are laments? Those who cannot defend themselves are not to be blamed,” he said with gentle authority; “and as to the rest, why you and I have weathered many storms together, and now I suppose we must make a new beginning.” The peculiar sweetness of his smile lighted up his face, but to his sister it did but reveal the depth of his sadness. Had he not been without hope, she knew that she could not have seen the single sweetness of a despairing smile which was sadder than tears.

They sat on late into the night, talking over plans,—of his future and of hers. Their uncle Robert was rich and a widower, and he had asked that she might make her home with him. “It is not what I could have wished for you, Gusty,” Walter said; “but it is what people call a suitable arrangement, and I don’t know that at present you could do better.” Augusta made no objections.

She could not bear to be a burden upon him, and she knew well that he would never allow her to do anything towards her own maintenance ; so she acquiesced ; feeling indeed, after the blow she had received, as if it mattered little what happened to her next. Then she asked about himself ; but his brow contracted ; he said that he had not had time to form any distinct plan, and went back to speak of their uncle and of the arrangements that had been made for her. All this time, notwithstanding their nearness to each other,—notwithstanding her sisterly familiarity and acknowledged privileges,—she had not dared to put to him the question which had risen up in her mind : what would become of Christina ? how would this affect her ?

A great misfortune had fallen upon them ; they had to meet it together ; and he had no cause to dissemble with her ; their eyes were alike open to the extent of the danger which threatened them : but yet she felt that she might drive him to desperation if she spoke of it openly ; or even if



she showed her consciousness of it. So they talked calmly enough of their money matters and of their change of life, and lingered as they separated for the night, each with a dread of the solitude and silence of the dark hours ; but neither of them had spoken of the one renunciation, beside which, in his mind at least, every other was as nothing.

There must be another long night of weary struggle, fighting the same battle that he had been fighting for the last week ; but it could not go on for ever. Twelve hours more, and he said to himself that a resolution must be taken, for or against. He was worn by conflicting convictions and desires, and also by something higher than his own convictions. The fight had raged fiercely, and he was faint from sustained effort ; his better nature was urging him to his own destruction ; something higher than his better nature was striving for his salvation : but he resisted the diviner impulse, not discerning its divinity ; and when he threw himself at last upon his bed, as the faint pink light of morning



spread itself over the eastern sky, he knew that he was victorious; but he did not know that worldly generosity and honour had triumphed over a nobler generosity and a heavenly honour which the world neither knows nor recognizes.

## CHAPTER XX.

IT was late the next morning when Walter Cleasby came down and found his sister waiting breakfast for him. His few hours of sleep had done something towards effacing the traces of fatigue and mental disturbance; but he was still paler than his wont, and there was a half-concealed effort in the attempts he made to maintain his ordinary manner. It hurt his sister a little: she would have been so glad if he had been unreserved and given way to his mood before her; it was hard that they should have to suffer under the same misfortune, and yet that she should be unable to offer sympathy or speak of that part of it which touched him most nearly. Still, as he chose to talk of

other things, she did not as yet venture even to pronounce Christina's name. So the dreary half-hour passed whilst they sat, each at their end of the table, striving to look to each other as if everything were as usual ; and when the breakfast things were carried away, Walter took up the newspaper and pretended to interest himself in it.

Augusta began to feel that she could not much longer exercise the same forbearance ; they must speak of it some time, and if he would not make a beginning, it must be for her to do it.

"Walter," she said at last, in as indifferent a tone as she could command, when Lewis had carried off his tray and shut the door behind him, and the room was once more in silence ; "Walter, are you going out this morning ?"

"I don't know," he said, without looking up. "Yes, I suppose that I must go out presently ; I have business in Overton."

"Then shall you call at the White House on your way ?" said Augusta : but she trembled as

she spoke; and she knelt down on the rug and began to stir the fire and make a clatter with the fire-irons, as if to drown the sound of her own voice.

"No," he said; and his voice sounded hard; and after that one word there was another oppressive silence, until Augusta spoke again.

"Would you rather she came up here, Walter? Would you like me to go and see her? Can I do anything?" She was still kneeling on the rug, with her back turned to him, for she dared not ask the question face to face.

"Do anything! no, how could you do anything?" he said with the impatience of a wounded man whose hurt she was unnecessarily probing. Then at last she took courage; and when she raised her eyes to his face and saw that everything else had given way to the restless look of suffering joined to the determination of despair, a compassionate yearning brought the unwonted tears in a rush to her eyes.

"Oh, Walter!" she cried, with a sob in her voice.—After all, though he held his fate in his own hands, though he was almost cold in his independence, he was still her younger brother whom she had loved since the time when he was a delicate little boy, and they had clung together, and he had looked to her, not having any mother to look to.—She went to him now, and clung to him and cried, "Oh, Walter, what shall you do?" without giving any more thought to the immediate consequence of her words. Perhaps it was a relief to him to have the barrier of reserve between them thus suddenly broken down; at all events he made no attempt to re-establish it.

"Why, Gusty, you must keep up your heart," he said, with a faint smile; "you must keep up your courage. We must face things as they are. It is no use fighting against the inevitable. I don't pretend to be what people call resigned; I would undo it all if I could; but at least I am capable of recognizing the fact that it cannot be undone."

“Yes,” she said, and held her breath and waited for what would follow.

“There is nothing but the one thing which I hold in my hands,” he continued, now speaking with the quietness which belongs to a hardly-won resolution; “and, though I am sinking, I have not lost my senses so far as to wish to take it to the bottom with me.”

This, then, was what she had dimly feared; and yet, though she had entertained the fear, its confirmation struck coldly upon her heart, and her woman’s nature exclaimed against it. She understood the ways of the world; she had accepted its decrees; she recognized, in some sort, the necessity of conforming to its laws, and she was not altogether out of reach of its spirit. Yet it was not without being moved that she had watched Christina. She understood, in part, what the blow would be to her; and now she felt the sympathetic thrill of a generous nature, and recoiled from her brother’s words, and cried out indignantly against him.

“You cannot do it, Walter,” she said; “how can you tell her? You cannot take back what you have given. She would not understand you. It is everything to her; it would kill her to have it taken away.”

“Would it be better that she should die slowly and by degrees?” he said. “Is it in my power to save her? She could not bear years of waiting, to end perhaps in disappointment. She is brave, but she is not patient; her pride will help her now and her natural indignation. It is the only thing to be done. It is new to you, but remember that for the last week it has been horribly near to me. I have seen that it is the only right and honourable course. I must fall, but why should I drag her down with me?”

“You may rise again,” she said—and even now she could not conquer her first repulsion.

“But when? No, Augusta, there is no use in deceiving ourselves. A man who has left the only profession he ever entered upon, and who is, at



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my age, once more thrown upon his own resources, stands a poor chance of making anything like a competency for many years to come. Even if my uncle did offer me a junior clerkship in his bank, what would it amount to? A salary of a hundred or so to begin with, and the prospect of a small yearly increase. Besides, I never could do a sum in my life. No, Gusty, when it is a question of earning my bread, I am a useless drug in the market. I can do most things a little, and nothing well: then, whatever line you take up, you must have capital to make any beginning that it is worth while making. Think what it would be, even if I could manage to stay in England;—ten or twelve years of drudgery, to end perhaps in disappointment, when waiting had worn out even her spirits, and a long-deferred hope had died within her. Ask yourself if any man could have a right to bring it upon her.”

“It has not been your fault; you could not know.”

“No, it has not been my fault ; but it would be my fault if I were to hold her to it, or let her hold herself bound. It has not been my fault that what we had looked to can never come to pass. That has been a misfortune which might have happened to any man, and it must be accepted. But whatever I might do for myself, I will not for her sake embark upon a long and almost hopeless engagement.”

“She would not give you up because of all this,” said Miss Cleasby.

“No,” he said ; and even at this moment the proud admiration which was so strongly blended with his love for an instant lighted up his face. “No ; but is not that an additional reason why I should take care of her ? It is for me to save her from herself.”

“Perhaps you are right, Walter.”

“If I am wrong, it is past praying for. I cannot fight it over again.” Then he got up and tramped across the stone hall into his own study opposite, shutting the door behind him.

Augusta, as she sat by herself and reflected upon the crisis with the comparative calmness natural to some one who was, after all, but an interested spectator, could not help mentally confirming the judgment she had finally delivered as to the rectitude of the course he was about to pursue. With her heart aching over his suffering, and Christina, as yet, so happy and confident, and unconscious of the blow hanging over her, she could not be an altogether impartial judge. But she told herself that, if she had not known them, she would have said that the only possible and right course under the circumstances was to break off the engagement. She would have said that the girl would get over it in time and probably marry some one else ; and as to the young man, he had no right to maintain his claims, and anything was better than an engagement with no prospect of marriage. It sounded plausible, and her reason assented to it ; but when she thought of Christina it was not so easy to leave out of sight the bewildering and

individual complications of the case. Though she tried to resume her ordinary occupations, her mind reverted again and again to the question of how he would do it, and of when and how she would receive the tidings.

In the meantime Walter, alone in his study, was painfully and practically setting himself to the solution of these same questions. To the first he had already given a mental answer ; it only remained to put his purpose into execution. He sat down before his writing-table, and leant his head upon his hands, and stared blankly at a sheet of paper. There was nothing to disturb the current of his thoughts, there was nothing to prevent them from shaping themselves into words : no one would be likely that morning to break in upon his solitude. The tranquil sunshine lay upon the trim lawn outside, the sky overhead was blue and cloudless, the fire burnt clear and bright, the clock upon the chimney-piece was ticking with a peaceful regularity, his terrier lay asleep upon the rug, his paper

was before him and his pen in his hand; and yet he was distracted and confused, and flung it down, feeling that something, not himself, must be in fault. Of course it was that clock; he had never heard it tick so loudly before; it rang in his ears so that he could think of nothing else, and almost felt himself constrained to count the beats. He got up hastily, feeling a personal rage against the innocent piece of mechanism, and stopped the pendulum, and put it back upon the mantel-piece with a slight bang. Then he went back to his table and put the date to his letter; but his mind was in a whirl; the canary in the passage outside was singing shrilly, and, with an angry exclamation, he flung himself into an arm-chair before the fire, feeling that it was useless to put pen to paper whilst all external agencies, both animate and inanimate, were combining against him to make thought and composition alike impossible.

It was not that he had not arrived at a resolution; he had done so, after a long struggle which could not

be repeated. He had longed to help her, and he had determined that it was impossible; he had thought that he ought to look to her happiness rather than to his own; and he had made up his mind that, though she would not be able to see it now, it would be for her ultimate good to separate from him. It was a miserable thing for a girl to waste her youth in waiting for what might never come; he would think it dishonourable and selfish in any other man to ask it of her; it would be selfish and dishonourable in him. Thus his better nature, which called upon him to save her and protect her from her own impulse, took part against him. As to marrying without a provision, and casting her fortune and his to chance, or as to making a descent in the social scale and facing poverty and life in another sphere, the thought had but passed through his mind and made no impression upon it. He was not deficient in moral courage, or unwilling to face privations for himself; but the traditions of convention made such a proceeding so repugnant to him as to appear



impossible. A man, he would have said, could always make his way and fall upon his feet, but a girl was a thing to be guarded and cherished—too precious a possession to be trusted to the rough chances of life. He would rather, far rather, renounce Christina, than claim her for his wife when he had not the power to shield her from everything from which he conceived that *his wife* ought to be shielded.

All these conflicting thoughts had maddened and bewildered him during the last ten days, and he had thrust aside the only thing which might have saved him. For there was a voice which sang to him of a love that cannot die; of a faith that no earthly honour can approach and no earthly chances shake. There was a voice which told of something higher than the right and wrong of his own standard; of a trust which cannot be broken, and of a promise which cannot be recalled. But human voices mingled so loudly with the heavenly strain that he could not distinguish it from them; they were the voices



which told him that he could not give up Christina because of the pain to himself ; they were the voices which made him shrink from the effort, telling him of the blank life that lay before him, of the dreariness of the future and the sweetness of the past ; they recalled to him her looks and words, and made him desperate at the thought that they would soon be to him nothing but a memory.

All this he thrust from him as unmanly weakness, and with this he thrust out an angel unawares.

He had arrived at a conclusion of which his judgment approved, and to which his reason assented, and now it only remained to put it upon record. It would be better that she should know what awaited her before they met ; nothing else remained to be done ; he had only to write to her—but what ?

Only to tell her that what had been her life must be cut short now before it had had time to blossom ; only to say that the past must be forgotten ; that it must be nothing to her ; that she must learn to be

happy in some other way. Only to say that they must part, and part for ever.

At first he felt that he could not do it, and then he put a force upon himself. His delicate, sensitive organization had yet sufficient nervous power to accomplish that to which he had set his at length undivided will, at whatever cost to himself. When once he had summoned resolution for the first word, the rest followed, and he wrote with the rapidity of a man who has formed a determination and dares not go back to examine the grounds upon which he has arrived at it.

*"12th November.*

"DEAREST CHRISTINA,"—he wrote the first words mechanically, and then he remembered that it was the last time that he might use them, and could not bring himself to make any other but the accustomed beginning.

"DEAREST CHRISTINA,

"I came home last night, but I could not come to you, because it was so late and I had something to

say which I could not say then ; yet I could not meet you and remain silent. Now, I still do not know how to say it. I had meant to have written from London, but to the last I was hoping against hope.

“I had thought myself so secure ; I had thought it was impossible that anything should come between us ; and at first I could not believe it, or face the reality.

“It is useless to go back upon the causes, or tell you how it is that I am so poor a man as to have nothing to depend upon except myself. When this place is sold, there will be nothing left except a few hundred pounds in trust for Augusta. She has had a home offered to her by our uncle, and for a man it does not so much matter ; and yet, Christina, I can think of nothing but ourselves. My life must be a life which you cannot share with me : I could not ask it, and I will not accept the sacrifice. It must be a struggle ; I must encounter things which I would put far from you ; and I know that, at whatever cost, it is better that what has to be done should be done quickly. It would be a mockery for me to keep the

hope of claiming you before my eyes, even if I could remain in England. You are too far above the world to understand its ways, but it will be impossible for our engagement to continue. Your grandfather would not allow it, and he would be right. Christina, you will believe me when I say that I would have given worlds to spare you ; but I cannot suffer without making you suffer.

“ It is best that we should face the truth at once. As to the rest, what can I say ? People will tell you that I am false, and cruel, and worldly : it will be best for you to believe that they are right. I do not ask you to forgive me : only remember that I could not do it unless I loved you ; remember that you have glorified my life by the past weeks of short unclouded happiness, and that, although they may never return to me, no other days will ever efface their memory or take their place.

“ Yours ever,

“ WALTER CLEASBY.”

It was a blank cold statement of the fact? Yet what could he say? What right had he to say more? He had put it plainly; partly understanding that she would not be able to comprehend the truth unless it came to her in all its nakedness; partly conscious that his words must strike her at first with incredulous wonder. He did not read again what he had written; he dared not look again upon the letter which sealed his fate; but he rang the bell and gave it at once to the servant. "I want this to be taken to the White House," he said; "not immediately; it will be time enough when the letters go to the evening post."

He could not keep the letter in his sight for fear that he might be tempted to recall it, and yet something impelled him to leave Christina a few hours more of unconscious happiness, and made him shrink from bringing nearer, by however short a time, the possibility of a meeting.

## CHAPTER XXI.

MR. NORTH had passed a restless night ; he was no better, but rather worse, in the morning, and his daughter-in-law in alarm sent for Mrs. Oswestry and for the doctor. The latter could only reiterate his opinion that there was nothing immediate to be apprehended, but the old man was growing weaker, and the coming winter would probably be his last. As for Mrs. Oswestry, she was calm and composed under all circumstances ; but she shared in Mrs. North's fears, and, after visiting her father, came to consult with her as to the best means of softening and brightening the last months of his life. Christina coming into the room an hour later found them still in close consultation, and wondered vaguely what they could find to talk about for so long together.

"But do you think that he would see her if she came?" Mrs. North was saying; "it is a long journey, and it would be hard upon her to take it for nothing. He has never mentioned her name for years, to my knowledge."

"But I have spoken of her to him," said Mrs. Oswestry; "I do not say that he has shown any interest, but at least he has borne it patiently, and I feel if she were here——"

"Of whom are you talking?" asked Christina. "Is it a secret? Shall I go away?"

"No, it is no secret—at least not now," said Mrs. Oswestry; "we were talking of my sister, your aunt Charlotte."

"But I never knew I had another aunt," exclaimed Christina, looking from one to the other in astonishment.

"Perhaps not; as your mother says, her name was never mentioned here, and she must have married when you were quite a little girl, though she is the youngest of us all."



“And you always were so indiscreet, Christina,” interposed her mother; “I never knew what you might say, or what wild fancies you might take into your head. Your grandfather did not wish to speak of her, and you were never likely to see her, so there was no use in telling you about it.”

“But why was she not to be spoken of?”

“She made a marriage your grandfather did not approve,” said Mrs. Oswestry; “she married an Italian, and your grandfather had always such an objection to foreigners. It happened whilst she was paying a visit away from home, and your grandfather would never be persuaded to see him or give his consent to the marriage. Lotty would have her own way; there was no objection to the man except his nation; he had good birth, though he was not a noble, and in a pecuniary point of view it was a very good match. She waited until she was one-and-twenty, and then she went away and was married from a mutual friend’s house. I

was the only one of our family there, and your grandfather never forgave her."

"But does she write? Where does she live? When is she coming?" cried Christina, becoming interested.

"She has always kept up a correspondence with me. She lives at Florence, where her husband has some business, and there she has brought up her children. She had two children, and lost her only girl two years ago; the boy is about twelve or thirteen, and is still at school. So she says that she could easily manage to be absent from home for a few months, and if my father would receive her she would like to see him again before he dies."

"How strange! that I should have an aunt that I have never heard of before!" said Christina: but after all it did not excite her very much, and when Mrs. Oswestry took her leave late in the afternoon, her thoughts were no longer engrossed by the idea of her unknown aunt, but were busying themselves in speculations as to whether Miss

Cleasby had heard from her brother that day, and whether she would know when he was coming home.

She had made up her mind that she would go to the Park to see Augusta ; but as she turned out of her gate the servant met her with the letter. She took it (as we so often take our death-blows) carelessly, unconsciously, with a word of thanks to Lewis, thinking that it was some note from Miss Cleasby ; but as she turned it over in her hands and caught sight of the address, suddenly the colour flushed into her face and a pang of undefined apprehension shot through her. It was unreasonable, it was absurd ; there was in truth nothing to make her afraid—only that Walter must be at the Park ; and if he were at the Park, why had he not come to her ? Some accident must have happened ; some disaster must have befallen him.

“Was that the man from the Park ?” said Mrs. North, meeting her in the passage. “Has Miss Cleasby written to you ?”

"Yes—no—nothing," said Christina, passing on hastily. It was not until she had reached her room and locked the door that she opened the letter. Her eager eyes glanced all over it, her face flushing and paling as she read, and when she had ended she thrust it from her with a kind of impatience. Once more she read the words, but without their making any distinct impression upon her. She was striving painfully to grasp their meaning, but she could not make it out. She dropped the letter from her hands and gave a low cry of pain and bewilderment.

"I—I don't understand. What does it mean?" she said aloud, although there was no one to hear or answer. The letter lay unheeded upon the floor; she lay crouched up upon the bed pressing her face upon the pillows, and cried again piteously, "I don't know what it means."

And yet in some sort she did understand; she understood with a shrinking dread that a horrible misfortune was hanging over her, although its form was shadowy and undefined. She was afraid again

to look upon the words which told her of it ; more than half an hour had passed before she took the letter again into her hands. Then at last she understood,—understood what he would do—what he had done already. His creed was not hers ; she could not even grasp its articles, nor comprehend their influence upon his actions : his faith was not her faith ; yet to his standard she must conform, and by his will she must abide. She sat motionless for a few moments, as if stunned by the blow ; and then, as the first incredulous horror grew less, natural resentment and pride and passion surged up in her heart. She had trusted him, and how had he repaid her trust ! It was cruel ; it was impossible that all that had been should come to an end, and yet she felt that it had come to an end already. If he could speak the words which he had spoken—if he could feel what he had felt, there could be no escape and no recall. Such words cannot be forgotten. She could not even understand what it was that he feared ; it was he himself who had shaped their

fate. All the bitterness would have been taken from the blow if only she could have felt that it had not come from his hand. Oh, why had he done it?

But we cannot in the first shock of sorrow find for long refuge or relief in personal indignation. Walter was right; if she could have shut him out from her heart—if she could have refused to forgive him, it would have been easier for her; but she could not do it. She was still fiercely resisting her fate, but misery had overcome resentment, and love and pity had, towards him, taken the place of every other feeling.

After a time her mother knocked at her door, and, on entering, found her still in her hat and cloak, but busying herself with something upon the dressing-table. She turned her face for a moment towards her mother, and then Mrs. North gave a frightened exclamation, as if she had seen a ghost.

“Christina! What is it? What has happened?” she exclaimed.

“I—I am rather—cold,” said Christina, shivering, and put out her hand to steady herself against the table.

“Your grandfather wanted to see you; but you cannot go to him now,” said Mrs. North. “I wish, Christina, you would not go and make yourself ill. I am sure that it is bad enough as it is, with your grandfather at death’s door, for anything that we know, and your aunt Margaret so bent upon bringing Lotty over to make things worse, and all the worry about your marriage.”

“I will not go to grandpapa,” said Christina, quickly; “I am very tired, and my head aches. I think I will go to bed.”

“Do you feel as if you had caught anything?” asked Mrs. North, anxiously. “There is scarlet fever in the village, Janet tells me, and if you think——”

“No, no,” said Christina, hastily; “I am not ill—only tired.”

“I wish I knew what it is,” said Mrs. North to herself, as she went downstairs again. “Christina



is so unlike herself; she is ill, or something must have happened. I wish I knew what it is."

She was not long left in ignorance. Walter Cleasby, following out in his own mind with painful distinctness the course which events were taking at the White House, and seeking for any means by which he might lighten Christina's burthen, had considered that she might be called upon for explanations, and would have to put into words what she had as yet hardly realized to herself. If he could save her from it, he would. He put little faith in the judgment or forbearance of Christina's mother; but he wrote to her, briefly announcing what had happened, and imploring her to leave Christina this night undisturbed by questions. He acknowledged that he had no longer any right to stand between them; but, as a matter of course taking to himself all the blame of what had occurred, begged that he alone might bear the weight of her reproaches.

"As if a mother could leave her child to bear

her trouble alone!" Mrs. North said to herself, with some natural indignation; and yet she was not angry because Captain Cleasby, under the circumstances, had chosen to give Christina up. It was in her eyes the only thing which he could have done; but as to speaking to her child, she certainly might be allowed to judge for herself. And then she went upstairs and knocked at Christina's door, still holding his letter in her hand. Christina was unconscious of everything except her own misery, and it was not until her mother had knocked and called to her two or three times that she rose from her bed and went to open the door, pushing away her loosened hair from her face.

"He has written to me," said Mrs. North. "Oh, my poor child, what can I do for you? It has always been the way with us, but I had begun to hope that it might be better for you; and all seemed so certain; but of course we never know."

Christina was sitting on the edge of the bed, with her hand clasping the iron rail, and she hardly

seemed to hear her mother, but looked at her vacantly with tearless eyes.

"It is a great misfortune," Mrs. North went on; "I feel it for you very much: but it is better to know the worst. Captain Cleasby is acting rightly, though, you know, I never liked him; and if you had been married, you know——"

Christina started, and the colour flamed into her face.

"Not now, mother," she said; "don't let us talk of it now."

"You never will talk of anything to your mother," said Mrs. North, plaintively. "Any other girl would want a little sympathy; any other girl would be sorry for me too, because I have thought a great deal of your future, Christina; and it is very hard upon me to have to break it to your grandfather. If you had any natural feeling, Christina, you would like to see what he says to me."

"I don't want to read it," said Christina, pushing away the offered letter; "what can he say?"

“Oh, Christina,” said Mrs. North, reproachfully, but with some natural tears; “why are you so rebellious? We must not fight against the troubles which are sent to us; it is fighting against grace, it is fighting against God.” She hardly knew why she said it, poor woman; she had need of help herself, and she did not feel able to help Christina, but yet she felt instinctively that she was wrong, and the words, though the result of a weak and wavering conviction, were not without their effect.

When Christina was left alone, they re-echoed in her heart. Was she indeed fighting against grace—fighting against God? She knew little of any religion but the natural and spontaneous religion of youth. God was good, and the world was beautiful, and she rejoiced in it, and was thankful because she was happy. She had had to struggle, and she had struggled in her own strength; she had fallen, she had repented, and she had risen again. But now she had entered upon another struggle, in which she felt that her own strength

would not be sufficient to her: the waters had gone over her, and she knew that she was sinking; the inevitable was pressing upon her, and she saw no means of escape. And yet she was fighting—fighting, as she had thought, against her fate; thrusting away the cross which had been put upon her and the cup of suffering which she must drink: and as yet she had not thought that she was fighting against God. As the truth made itself manifest to her in the lonely hours of that night,—the most momentous night of her life, in which for the first time she sent up a cry for help; not that she might obtain what she desired, but that she might accept what was given; not that she might do her own will, but God's; not that the cross might be taken away, but that she might be able to bear it,—so the bitterness was taken from her sorrow by the nearness and the constraining influence of the Divine, and a Light shined in her darkness, though as yet she comprehended it not.

## CHAPTER XXII.

THE days that followed passed, as such days will pass, outwardly very like those which had preceded the downfall of Christina's hopes and the wreck of her happiness. She had never again referred to the letter she had received, and her mother dared not speak of it to her. Mr. North had been told, of course; and although he had been bitter in his resentment at the moment, it seemed as if increasing weakness had diminished his powers of memory, and after the first day it often seemed to Mrs. North as if it had passed away altogether from his mind.

As to Christina, she was pale and silent, but she moved about the house as usual: she waited upon

her grandfather and cared for his comfort; she took her share in the night nursing, and would never own that she was tired; she met Mrs. Oswestry without embarrassment; and she was kind and friendly in her manner to Mr. Warde when he came to see her grandfather: she was not exactly repellant or ungracious, but yet, for some reason or other, they none of them dared to speak to her of what had occurred.

She had made no answer to Walter Cleasby's letter. What could she say? She told herself that that page of her life had been closed for ever, and she would not speak of it again. She bore herself bravely, and those about her could only guess at what was passing within her.

Walter hung about the place in the hope that he might meet some one of whom he might venture to ask what was passing at the White House. At first he had a faint hope that he might receive some word in answer to his letter: he had even thought that it was possible she might consent to



see him; but three days passed and he heard nothing. He knew that he had brought it upon himself; even now he did not wish it undone, but the suspense was hard to bear. He tortured himself by conjuring up twenty different solutions of her silence: and then again sometimes he thought that it was pride and resentment which prevented her from making any sign, and he tried to be thankful that it should be so. It would make it easier for her if her indignation should master all else.

Mrs. North had written very briefly and coldly, simply acknowledging his letter, and intimating that under the altered circumstances no doubt he had done wisely in breaking his engagement; but she made no mention of Christina. Miss Cleasby had called at the White House to inquire for Mr. North; but she had only seen Janet, who answered her shortly, and from whom she was too proud to ask more than the doctor's opinion. So the days passed wretchedly at the Park, and Walter, harassed by business matters, and growing desperate in his

anxiety to hear of Christina, could no longer keep up any pretence of indifference, but made his sister uneasy by his restless manner and altered looks.

She was driving through the village on the fourth day in her pony-carriage, thinking of it all, and with a cloud of anxiety on her usually serene face, when it suddenly cleared, and was replaced by a flush of eagerness, as she caught sight of Mr. Warde coming out of a cottage, and trotted the pony up to him.

"Can you spare me a few minutes?" she said, almost breathless in her impetuosity. "Oh, Mr. Warde, you are my good angel! you will be able to tell me what I want to know."

"I am sure I shall be very happy if I can be of any use," he said, pleased and surprised at the appeal, but in truth feeling as if his position as Miss Cleasby's good angel was, however delightful, slightly embarrassing.

"I suppose you have heard of our misfortune?" said Augusta, leaning forward and allowing the

pony to proceed at a foot's pace, whilst Mr. Warde walked beside the carriage.

"Yes; I was very sorry to hear of it," he said, looking at her with grave interest.

"We do not want to publish it at present," Augusta went on, "because, you see, it is so disagreeable to have everyone talking about you; and when we are gone——"

"Then you are going?" he said, with something of regret in his voice.

"Of course we are going, but that is not what I wanted to talk about. Mr. Warde, you go to the White House, I know; you will forgive me if I am doing wrong, but you cannot think what a relief it would be to know something about—about them," said Augusta, hesitating to pronounce Christina's name.

"Christina has spoken to no one," he said, understanding what it was that she wished to know, and replying with the straightforwardness natural to him. "Her mother tells me that since that first evening

when she forced her to it, she has not opened her lips upon the subject. No doubt it would be better for her if she could be open; but I do not see who has a right to break through the reserve she chooses to maintain. She looks very pale, but she goes about the house as usual."

There was a controlled displeasure in his manner. Augusta felt that he was blaming Walter, and could not refrain from taking up his defence.

"Walter could not have done otherwise," she said. "I feel, Mr. Warde, that you are blaming him. He has suffered also, but it has not been his fault."

"I have pronounced no judgment upon him," said the Vicar. "It is not for me to judge; but I have been very sorry for Christina, and very sorry for you all."

"But the part which touches her is the worst," said Augusta. "It is sad for my brother also; but it is not the money which matters so much."

"You do not yet know how much money does

matter," he said gravely. "You have been all your life accustomed to riches. It requires a long apprenticeship to understand either the privations or the blessings of poverty."

"And you think I am not capable of it!" she said; and he saw to his surprise that she was hurt by the inference she had drawn from his words.

"I had no right to say so,—I had not intended, I had not meant to judge you," he answered, and for the second time in his life he felt the embarrassment which no one but Miss Cleasby had ever produced in him.

"I think a little wholesome admonition would do me good," she said. "You see, Mr. Warde, I cannot trouble Walter; and he is younger, and so I have no one to go to when I want a little advice. I might ask Lady Bassett, but then she would never keep our counsel; and besides, I know exactly what she would say beforehand. Do you think you could imagine yourself a ritualist just for a quarter of an hour, Mr. Warde, and think that I am a

high-church young lady come to you for ghostly counsel?"

"Those preliminaries are not necessary," he said, recovering himself.

"We will leave them out, then," she said; "and indeed it is upon very worldly affairs that I want to consult you. I suppose you know that we have lost, not only some money, but everything; it does not matter how, only it has not been Walter's fault; and now he wants me to go and live with our uncle Robert, who is a banker in London. He is kind enough; it is kind of him to ask me, and I cannot bear to vex Walter by refusing; but I certainly do dislike it most particularly. I cannot bear to be always dependent. He is my uncle; but it is not as if I knew him well, and I know he will be as much bored as I shall be. Now what do young ladies do when they have no means, or next to none, and want to support themselves in a way that will not hurt their relations' susceptibilities?"



“If I had adopted the character which you assigned to me,” said the Vicar, “I should answer at once: enter a sisterhood.”

“I should not mind it so very much,” said Augusta, after a pause, “if I might take Don with me.”

Mr. Warde was growing perplexed: he would have thought that she was laughing at him: but when he looked at her he could not but believe in her earnestness. There was a touch of humour about her mouth, but there was no doubt that her difficulties were real enough, and that they weighed upon her.

“It is so difficult for me to judge,” he said; “I wish I could help you, but I know so little about these things. Of course I was not serious about the sisterhood. It must be very hard for you, to leave your brother and this place.”

“Yes;—rather hard!” she said; and he saw to his surprise that her eyes were wet with tears. She had been striving to keep up Walter’s spirits for



the last three days: she had been taking last looks at her familiar haunts and endeavouring to reconcile herself to the change, and her naturally strong nerves had been so far tried as to make them susceptible to what at another time would have made little impression upon them.

"I wish I could do anything," he repeated in his perplexity. He said it with such grave anxiety that Augusta could not help laughing, even whilst for some reason she felt provoked.

"I don't know why I care so much," she said; "it is very ridiculous. We won't talk about it any more. Thank you for letting me burthen you with all my troubles. I have taken up a great bit of your time; but you know I said I should look upon you as a friend if I ever was in any trouble, and you see it came before we expected it after all, and took me a little by surprise."

She said it softly, and turned her fine face towards him, and held out her hand.

"It is for me to thank you," he said.

“No, no,” she answered, colouring as she spoke; “but I hope you will let me know if you do chance to hear of any favourable opening for me. Good-bye, and thank you.” She shook the reins, and the little pony-carriage was soon out of sight in the winding road. She felt a little dreary and desolate. The only friend she had at hand had been unable to give her any assistance, and she felt now that it had been unreasonable and foolish of her to ask it of him: and then something in the tone of his parting words had made her uncomfortable. She wished that she had not spoken.

She went straight into the drawing-room when she reached home, thinking to find her brother, and give him the small piece of comfort she had been able to extract from Mr. Warde: at least Christina was not ill, but able to occupy herself as usual, and this would be something of a consolation to Walter; but he was not at home, and she had only time to write a hasty note to be sent after him in case he should be detained long in Overton,

when the door-bell rang, and she prepared to receive some unconscious visitor with outward composure. Then came the sound of steps across the stone hall which she seemed to recognize, and Lewis opened the door and announced Mr. Warde. She had risen at his entrance, and now stood still before him in her amazement.

"After I had parted from you," he began almost before the door was shut, "I thought of another alternative. You said that I might come if I thought of anything, and you have only to say No. Miss Cleasby, is it possible that you would let me take you to my home?"

She liked, and respected, and honoured and trusted him; and yet she did not know what to say. She sank down in a chair, and could as yet hardly open her mind to any other feeling than that of blank surprise.

"I never thought of it before," he said; "I knew that you were different from other women; but there was a barrier, and when it was partly

knocked down it still seemed impossible at first. If it seems so to you now, as I feel it must, you have only to say No."

"But I find it almost as difficult to say No as to say Yes," she said at last, almost as if speaking to herself.

"Then do not say anything at all. It is an important decision. I can wait."

"But, Mr. Warde, it will not be any easier by and by, and perhaps you might help me a little. It is not only myself that I am thinking about. I am *not sure* that I care for you; but I am not *at all* sure that you care for me."

He paused a moment before he answered, and she sat still and expectant, with her eyes fixed upon his face. He did not shun them.

"I do care for you," he said, in his manly voice, from which the momentousness of the occasion had taken away all shadow of embarrassment. "I knew before that there was no one else like you; but I did not understand it at first; after you

left me, it came upon me quite suddenly, like an inspiration."

"That is very curious," she said, with a soft little laugh.

"I do not know that it is curious. But I can understand that the thing seems impossible to you. If it could have been, it would have been a great happiness to me; if it is not to be, I can live without it; only do not deceive yourself by thinking that I do not care."

She did not, she could not deceive herself now; she understood that the man was throwing all the force of his strong nature into the effort to maintain a self-control which should neither disturb nor hurry her decision; and she too could be generous: "I may be deceiving myself, but I almost think that I do too," she said, in a low voice, casting down her eyes.

Then, self-controlled and humble though he was, he knew that he had won. "Thank Heaven," he said, and a sudden flush of triumph lighted up his face.

"That is rather premature," said Augusta, just glancing at him from under her eyelids. "You see, Mr. Warde, as you said just now, this is an important decision: I don't know whether we should either of us act in this way if we were quite in our right minds. You say that you were inspired, and I think I must wait till I am inspired too."

He had been very forbearing; he had warned her that she had better take time to consider, and she had rejected his warning; he felt that she had gone too far with him to go back, and that she would never know her own mind better than she knew it now.

"There is no need to wait," he said more impetuously; "it is an important decision, but I believe that if you wish to give me your answer, you can do so now. If you tell me that you want time to consider, I will wait; but if you can say Yes or No, it will be kinder to say it at once."

"Even if it is No?"

"Yes, even if it is No, it is still better that it should be said at once."



There was a pause, and then she rose up suddenly and held out her hand to him.

"I cannot say No," she said, colouring and smiling; "so if you are in such a hurry——"

"You need say nothing more," he answered, and his voice touched her by its expression of earnest and supreme contentment.

"It is very good of you to care so much. I do care for you," she said gravely.

And at this point Lewis suddenly interrupted the interview, coming in with a little pink note from Lady Bassett. Augusta came down to the realities of common life as she read it.

"Dear Augusta," the note said, "I am so very sorry. I wonder if it is really true that you have lost everything. I could not be happy without writing to you; I thought you were going to have a little peace and quiet, and you know how fond I am of you and of poor dear Walter. What shall you do? If it would be any little comfort to see



your poor old friend who is so sorry for you, you have only to write a word to say so to your affectionate

“CAROLINE BASSETT.”

They were waiting for an answer, and Augusta sat down at her table and wrote a few hasty lines, apologizing to Mr. Warde as if he were still nothing more to her than the incumbent of the parish.

She was grateful for Lady Bassett's kindness, but just now she did not want to see her.

“Dear Lady Bassett,” she said, “it is very kind of you. It is quite true. Walter and I will come over to see you some day before we leave.

“Yours affectionately,

“AUGUSTA CLEASBY.”

The interruption had been trivial enough, but it had sufficed to bring down Augusta's mind from the serious altitudes to which it had for a time ascended. For the moment she had been carried

away by his earnestness and her own feelings, but she was now again capable of looking at the external aspect of the case, and, in spite of everything, she could not help being amused at the situation.

“Have you ever thought that I may be a rather inconvenient possession?” she said, after a short silence during which he had been indulging in visions of future happiness such as had never before presented themselves to his practical imagination. “It is very strange and new, and I don’t understand it at all myself; but have you ever thought what you will do with me now that you have me?”

“That is to come,” he said, with unruffled serenity. And now she felt the gravity of the situation with a sudden pressure; but instead of yielding to it, she threw it off with a flight of levity which was hardly natural.

“Yes, there is a great deal to come,” said Augusta; “but now I want to talk to you a little about the things that are *not* to come. There are to be no

talks with the schoolmistress about the children; there are to be no visitings of rheumatic old women; and I am not to be expected to scold the cook if the mutton is over-done. There is also one other little condition which I should like to make. Dear Don has been accustomed to the best society; he abhors cats; so if there is one in the house she must take her leave; and he, of course, will live in the drawing-room as he does here."

"It is rather late to make conditions," said the Vicar.

"But it is not too late to go back: I have said that I like you—next best to Don; but I have not said——"

"You have said quite enough to make me very happy," interrupted Mr. Warde, "so happy that nothing you can say now can make any difference to me."

"I am very happy too," she said; "I did not think that anyone would care for me now as you care for me." Then she paused for a moment, and

added, thinking of Christina, "It is not so new to you as it is to me."

"It is as new; it has never been the same before," he said, answering her look.

"It is very new, and rather strange. I did not mean all that I said just now; but you will forgive me if I cannot help laughing a little; it would not have been so odd if you had not been a clergyman. Of course you did not think I meant all I said. I cannot go back now."

"No, thank Heaven!"

"But I wish you would not be in such a hurry. That is the second time you have said it, and these premature thanksgivings make me feel a little afraid of myself. In a week we shall know more about it, and then we can have a special one in church, if you like,"—and just at that moment, in time, perhaps, to spare her a reproof, the clock struck seven, and she broke off suddenly. "You must go," she said; "Walter will be coming home, and I must see him alone."

## CHAPTER XXIII.

AUGUSTA'S note had reached Captain Cleasby in Overton. It was a relief to him. At least Christina was not seriously ill ; and as to the rest, perhaps it was best that there should at present be no communication between them.

He met his sister looking more like himself than he had done for the past week, and went up and kissed her, though he was not usually demonstrative.

"Thank you, Gusty," he said, gratefully ; "you have taken a load off my mind." Augusta looked at him rather strangely, in a way he did not understand, but she made no direct answer ; and during dinner nothing passed between them upon the

subject. Afterwards, sitting with her in the drawing-room, he said abruptly—

“How did you hear?” for in her note she had made no mention of Mr. Warde.

“I was out driving, and in the village I met Mr. Warde,” she said, somewhat hesitatingly. “I thought he had probably been with Mr. North, and so I asked him.”

“Had he seen her?”

“Yes: and he said what I told you,—that she was going about as usual, and he seemed to think——”

“I don’t care what he thinks,” interrupted Walter; he had introduced the subject himself, and yet he felt as if he could not bear to have it discussed or to hear what other people thought about it; “he is not a man of any discernment; if he has seen her, she is not ill, and that is enough.”

“You do him injustice, Walter.”

“If I do, it does not matter. Look here, Gusty: this is what Uncle Robert says to me to-day; but

it is more for you than for me. He seems anxious to be kind, and he is coming down here for a day or two, so it will not be quite like going to a stranger."

"No," said Augusta slowly; "but, Walter, you must not be angry if I say that I think perhaps I may not go to Uncle Robert after all."

"Not go to him! Nonsense!" he said; "what else can you do? You know, Augusta, I cannot keep you with me; and what are you to live upon unless you go to him? I don't say it is what I could have wished for you, but I don't see what else can be done. Whatever you do, don't go in for pride and independence. There is nothing to hurt your pride, if you were as proud as Lucifer, in accepting an uncle's hospitality. Of course it would be different if you were a man; but if there is one thing that is detestable, it is an independent woman."

"It is not only pride, Walter."

"Then what preposterous notion is it?"



"I think of marrying Mr. Warde," said Augusta, with her eyes on the ground.

He was worried and sad, and even a little indignant, but yet he could not help laughing.

"Don't be so silly," he said; "really one would have thought the last week would have taken the capacity for making jokes away from us. I am sure Lewis would be scandalized if he heard us laughing. Have you noticed the lugubrious and sympathetic tone in which he announces dinner?"

And then she saw to her dismay that neither his laughter nor his incredulity was feigned, but on the contrary quite natural and spontaneous.

"I did not mean it as a joke," she said. "It may seem odd to you at first, but, odd or not, it is true. I met him this afternoon, and then he came here afterwards and I accepted him."

"What nonsense is this?" he said, but could no longer remain unmoved, or altogether incredulous.

"It is just this, Walter, that I have accepted

him. I should be so much happier, dear Walter, if you could say you do not mind."

"It is inconceivable!" he said, in his vexation and anger, walking away to the window. "Oh Gusty, why could you not wait? If you were so averse to going to Uncle Robert, I would have contrived something else. Anything sooner than this should have happened."

"It was not only because of Uncle Robert," she said, falteringly.

"Then what was it? If you must have married, why not have taken some one else? You know Algy Fielder only waited for a word of encouragement to be at your feet. I did not wish it before; he was not worthy of you; but at least you would have been safe and prosperous with him. And after all, he is a gentleman, and handsome, and devoted to you."

"He is not capable of real devotion; he does not understand it. But, Walter, you say I have often been unjust to you, and now you are unjust

to me. It is not Uncle Robert,—it is not because of what has happened,—it is not that I wanted a home.”

“Then what is it?” he said, more softly.

“It is because I care for him,” she said bravely, looking him full in the face.

“Nonsense!” he said, “what do you mean? You don’t understand what you are saying: do you mean to say that it is with you as—as it is with me?”

“Not as it is with you, Walter. No, there are different ways; but I do care for him.”

He paced the room once more in his perplexity, and then he came and sat down on the sofa by her.

“Gusty,” he said, almost jealously, “do you mean to say that he comes first?” It was not his nature to be exacting. A month ago he would have parted with her gladly if he had liked the man who had taken her from him, or even if he had considered it a good marriage for her in a worldly

point of view ; but now it would have been hard to part with her to anyone : she was the one thing which remained to him. The Cleasbys were not a demonstrative race, but these two had been together all their lives, and now a common misfortune had made them cling closer to each other. Yes ; now it would have been very hard to part with her to anyone, and to Mr. Warde it was almost an impossibility. Her heart was aching at the thought of the parting, and she clung to him and cried—

“Next to you, Walter,—next to you!”

“That is but a poor consolation,” he said. But yet it was a consolation ; he was still sad and perplexed, but her impulsive words had taken away the soreness from his heart.

“I ought to be glad, I suppose, that you are happy, Gusty,” he said ; “but you cannot expect me to say that I think him worthy of you. If you consented from an impulse of gratitude or anything of that sort, do not be ashamed to confess it ;

it would be better than to be forced to repent afterwards. Just think how different it will be from anything to which you have been accustomed."

"I have thought ; I have thought of all ; and if it were not for you I should not hesitate a moment to say that I am quite happy. It is only that I cannot bear to think that I am shutting myself off from you."

"You could not do that, Gusty," he said, in his old fond tones.

They sat together silently for a few minutes after that, each knowing that however near they might seem to be to each other now, nevertheless a separation was inevitable. The old love, the old bond could not indeed be done away with ; but yet after she was married it would never be the same again.

"Good night, Gusty," he said at last ; "forgive me if I have not been all that a brother should have been to-night. But it was an unexpected blow, and I am very tired."

Yet he was not a man to fight against the inevitable. He felt that she had a right to choose for herself, and however great a disappointment her choice might be to him, by the next day he had made up his mind to make the best of it.

“Am I to see him to-day?” he said. “I suppose he will come up here. I must write to Uncle Robert, and perhaps you had better write too. I believe he will be secretly relieved, but he will make heroic efforts to disguise his satisfaction; and I don’t suppose he will find much difficulty in reprobating you when he finds you are giving him up for the sake of a poor country parson.”

“I will write,” said Augusta; and then she added, rather pleadingly, “You will be kind to him, won’t you, when you see him?”

“I must, I suppose,” he said; “but I shall find it rather difficult. However, if I admire nothing else in him, I admire his audacity. I believe if he had had the chance he would have proposed to the five wise virgins in rotation. But there, Gusty,

I have said my say, and I shall be very happy to see him, if you will send him into my study when he comes."

Augusta Cleasby and Mr. Warde were the only actors in the little drama who were able at this time to extract any comfort or happiness from the circumstances by which they were surrounded. Walter had barely time to transact the necessary business; leisure had hitherto been to him a necessity of life, but now he left himself no moment of relaxation, and often sat up over his papers until late in the night. To his sister's remonstrances he replied that the business must be transacted, and he was impatient to be done with it all: but she guessed that he dreaded to leave himself time for regrets. The lawyer came down to see him, and Mr. Waltham the younger, to whom the estate had been mortgaged; and Walter, always courteous and apparently coldly indifferent, excited their wonder by his unconcerned manner. In truth, though it was a pang to him to part with



the property which he had looked upon as his own, and the home which he had been learning to love, and the countless accessories which belong to wealth, all this appeared of small importance by the side of the far harder renunciation which he had felt himself called upon to make.

Ten days had passed in interviews with lawyers and business correspondence ; and now the affairs had been put in order, and it only remained to select the few pieces of personal property which the Cleasbys had determined to retain, and then the estate, the house and everything it contained, was to be put up to auction.

“We must go away first, Augusta,” Captain Cleasby had said ; “people have been very kind and considerate, but we could not stay on here much longer : and as Uncle Robert has written so kindly, and wants you at least to go to him for a month or two and be married from his house, I think it will be much the best thing for you to do. He will come down two or three days

before the sale, and he wants to take you home with him."

"And you will come too, Walter?" she said, entreatingly.

"I shall be in London? yes; but I shall not go up on that day, I think. I shall stay until the last."

Then, though her heart was beating with apprehension and agitation, she forced herself to ask another question: "And afterwards, dear Walter?"

"Afterwards? Why should we talk about that?" he said; "sufficient to the day——" and then he paused, and felt that she must know some time, and that it might be best if he could bring himself to say it.

"Afterwards, I shall not be in London," he said gently, but in the tone of a man who has taken an irrevocable resolution; "I did not like to put it all upon you at once, Gusty: but I have for long made up my mind that I could not remain in England."

"Why did you not tell me before?" she said,

trembling; "it was cruel to keep this until the last I cannot part with you."

"Be reasonable, Gusty;" he said, "I cannot live in England. Even if I could support myself in London, it would be a miserable existence, and it would do no one any real good. You could not be with me, and I could not be at Overton. No Gusty, our ways have lain together so far, but they are diverging now. You are entering upon a new life, one that you have chosen for yourself, and I too must make a new beginning."

Then she burst into tears and exclaimed, "I will come too! I cannot let you go."

"And you will leave Warde behind?" he said, smiling sadly. "No, Gusty, you are much too fond of me, but you cannot do that."

Yet even in the midst of his trouble he was partly comforted by the love which had prompted her unreasonable proposition. He had made up his mind. When he was in London, when first the blow had fallen upon him, he had come across an

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old college friend who had taken a farm in South America, and was going out in a month or two to settle upon it. He was rather dreading the inevitable solitude of his life, and when he found that Cleasby was only anxious to escape from England and had no settled plans for the future, he used every argument to induce him to be his companion. And Walter yielded easily to his persuasions. He cared very little where he went, only it was a necessity to him to escape from the country and all old associations, and if possible to fix his fate before returning to Overton, so as to preclude all discussion. He had always liked Mr. Leslie; he was clever, original, taciturn, and eminently gentlemanlike; he would not in any way jar upon him; and as he was starting with a very small capital, Captain Cleasby's services would amply compensate for any obligation he might incur at the beginning. All this had been settled even before he returned to Overton, but he had postponed the necessary disclosure, dreading Augusta's opposition and dismay. It was over now,

and it only remained to break the other tie, which was closer than even that which bound him to his sister. He had already indeed broken with Christina, but he could not feel that all was over until he had seen her once more. Sometimes his dread of a meeting was so strong that he thought it would be better for them both that they should never look upon each other again. And then he felt that this was impossible. All this time she had sent him no word, she had made no sign; he knew nothing of what was passing at the White House; and the desire to speak to her again, to see her, and hear her voice, conquered his dread. He felt instinctively that she would not refuse to see him. He did not desire to be forgiven: he said to himself that it would be better for her that she should not be able to forgive: but at least they must meet once more.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

CHRISTINA had in truth maintained a more complete silence than Walter Cleasby knew. She had not only given him no word or sign, but she had also held so impenetrable a shield before her that even those with whom she lived could know nothing of what she felt. They only saw that she was quieter, sadder, colder, and more composed than she had ever been before. Her manner was gentler, and her thoughtfulness for her grandfather more apparent than it had been; she could even smile at times; but yet even Mrs. North, who was not a sympathetic observer, perceived that there was nothing spontaneous about her. She did not speak, as she had been used to do, upon the impulse of the moment;

her smile was no longer the sudden, vivid flash of youth and happiness ; it was slow and sad and indifferent. She had never been used to occupy herself steadily, but now, after her hours of attendance upon her grandfather were over, she would sit long, working silently, in the parlour. And all this time she asked no questions, she gave no confidence, she referred in no way whatever to what had taken place. One day her mother gathered courage to make in her presence some casual remarks upon the Cleasbys' misfortunes ; but she seemed as though she had not heard, and made no answer.

Yet it was not pride and resentment, as Walter had imagined, which kept her silent. She had been cruelly wounded ; she had been bitter and indignant, but this had long passed away. Something far deeper, something which he could hardly have comprehended, made it impossible for her to speak until she should have fought the battle with herself. For it was no longer against her fate, but against herself, that she was fighting ; and strange as it may seem,



incredible as it would have seemed to him, he did not at this time hold the first place in her thoughts. She had awakened to a sense of what her life had been—to a bewildered knowledge of something beyond and above her, against which she had sinned, in ignorance perhaps, but yet in wilful ignorance. She had imagined that she could shape her own destiny; she had resisted it; she had fled from it; she had thought that she had conquered it; and then at last she found that it was pressing upon her, and that there was now no way of escape. She had stretched out eager hands to grasp her happiness; she had not meant to be cruel, but yet she had thrust aside everything which came in her way; and, after all, her hands remained empty. She had allowed herself to be bound to Bernard, not knowing what she was doing, and then, when she found out her mistake, she had not brought herself to make a free confession, but had, in her fear of discovery, fled from herself and from the judgment to come, and taken a desperate step by way of

securing her safety, and all the time had told herself that it was her duty. She knew that she could not care for Mr. Warde; but then he did not care for her, and she had thought to bury her past. That step she had retraced; the happiness which she had conceived herself strong enough to renounce had shown itself to her eyes, and had constrained her to acknowledge that she could not of her own free will leave it behind her. There had followed a time when the present was yet more beautiful than the future, when each hour brought its own tribute of perfect happiness; when her past sins and sorrows shed only at moments a shadow across the path of light which she was treading; and then suddenly darkness had fallen upon her, and despair and misery; but in her darkness an unearthly Light had shone. She saw things as she had never seen them before; objects took unaccustomed forms; the shadows fell in strange places; and her eyes were sometimes dazzled by the heavenly splendour. Her own desires and hopes and aspirations faded into insignificance;

she was no longer struggling against her fate ; she recognized with horror and remorse that she had been fighting against grace, fighting against God ; her human instincts were still strong within her, and, though outwardly cold and calm, she was fighting in her silence a fierce battle with herself. But at least she no longer thought that she could mould her own fate ; she was no longer even crying for deliverance ; only that she might be able to accept what had been sent ; and dimly through the mist of her past sins and present perplexities the consciousness of the Divine Power made itself felt, and at this despairing moment of life shed peace upon her soul.

Yet this could not last for ever. After about ten days of silence and a hardly-won resignation, she was recalled to her individual misery : and human instincts and feverish longings crowded her heart and pressed upon it, so that it seemed the sharp pang of recollection gave her physical pain as she saw the well-known handwriting upon the note which Janet brought to her :—

“Can you see me?” it said; “I know I have no right to ask it, but yet I think that you will not refuse me; it is for the last time. You need never hear of me again—this once, Christina, and then I will ask nothing more.”

“The man is waiting for an answer, Miss Christina,” said Janet, standing before her. Then Christina started, and rose up trembling, and went to the table, and would have written her answer, but her hand shook so that she could not hold the pen.

“Tell him, yes,” she said; and when she was left alone she sat gazing at the letter with a passionate yearning which frightened her. Was it all to come over again? Had it all been in vain? Was her old life and her old love still so strong within her? She put down her head upon the table, and, for the first time since the blow had fallen, burst into passionate long-drawn sobs.

It was not until the first rush of irrepressible misery had spent itself that she recollected all the difficulties which stood in the way of a meeting.

Her mother would not, she knew, understand the instinct which made it impossible for her to refuse to see him. Her grandfather would never give consent to his entrance into the house; and yet she felt that she could not go to the Park. She went into the passage and called Janet.

“Janet,” she said, low and hurriedly, drawing her back into the room and shutting the door, “go to the Park and ask to see Miss Cleasby, and say that I will see Captain Cleasby at five o’clock this evening. Go at once, but first see if my mother is in grandpapa’s room, and ask her to come to me here.”

She was left again for a few minutes alone—only for a few; but in that time she had recovered some outward composure, and it was only by the strain in her voice and by the nervous tension of her clasped hands that she betrayed her inward agitation when Mrs. North came in answer to her summons.

“What is it, Christina?” she said, nervously; “I am sure I have had so many shocks lately that the

least thing is enough to frighten me. What has happened now?"

"It is only this, mother, that I must see Captain Cleasby here this evening."

"Your grandfather will not allow it: it is impossible, Christina: your own pride ought to tell you that it is impossible. He is going away; all that is over; he is going out of the country, and you need never hear of him again. You ought to be glad that it is so. It is for your own good not to see him now: he has no right to ask it."

Christina put her hands up wearily to her head, too much oppressed to make any answer; and Mrs. North thought that she was wavering, and continued the stream of her discourse.

"You must see that it is better not," she said; "I know how generous you are, and you would always sacrifice yourself; but in this case you would be sacrificing yourself to no purpose. You can do him no good."

"I have said that I will see him, mother."



"Then I will write," cried Mrs. North ; "you shall not be troubled, but he shall not come here, or see you again. I will write to him."

"No, mother," said Christina, suddenly rising up—a tall figure, with a pale face that looked paler in the dusky room, and eyes that had grown intense in determination : "No, mother, you shall not do that. It is only this once that I must choose for myself ; afterwards I will do as you please ; but I must see him this evening : if not at this house, I must see him somewhere."

Mrs. North looked at her, and dared say no more. She understood that nothing which she might say would be of any avail.

"As you will," she said, with tears ; "and if it must be, it had best be here ; only your grandfather must not know. He has grown so nervous, and he must not be agitated ; you had better go to him now, Christina, or he will wonder at your absence."

It is thus that custom and the imperative demands



of daily life come to supersede to all outward appearance our keenest agonies and bitterest pains: thus it is that we pass the cruellest moments of our lives—moments which we can never live over again, moments which seem to us as years, whilst we are apparently occupied in the discharge of some trivial duty or in the pursuit of some unprofitable pleasure.

Christina sat in the subdued light of the sick room, and read with a steady voice to the old man who lay dying upon his bed. She read of wars and commerce and the state of the country, in the low, unhurried, monotonous voice which suited him, and the hands of the clock crept slowly on, marking the moments which made her life; and the shadows deepened, and her grandfather slept. She sat motionless, with her dilated eyes fixed upon the clock. She watched the minutes as they passed, she watched the hour drawing nearer; and yet, when at last the clock in the hall told out its five strokes, she started and shivered, and could hardly control herself so as

to avoid any sound which might disturb the old man.

The next instant Janet softly opened the door, and signed to her; and then she knew that Walter Cleasby was in the house.

## CHAPTER XXV.

SHE was to see him now, and for the last time ; that was the one thought which, as she passed out of her grandfather's room, had in Christina's mind overpowered everything else. She had lived long enough with her misery for it to have become an accustomed thing and part of herself. It was not like disappointment or regret ; she seemed to have known it all along, and she would not have done other if she might. It was only that he never had understood, and now she knew that he never would understand.

She could not have felt anger ; and even her sorrow was for the moment forgotten in her love. The happy days she had left behind her for ever, his words and looks when he had been her lover, the

first moment of incredulous dismay, the letter which had brought her the tidings, the gradual bitterness of realization, the burning tears she had shed, the struggles of her sleepless nights, the despair which had closed her in, and the calm which she had so hardly won—all this, which she had thought to have remembered for ever, so long as she should live, was forgotten now: forgotten in the parting which lay before her.

She did not pause to look back; she gave no thought to what she should do or say; but swiftly and unhesitatingly she passed along the narrow passage. She pushed open the half-shut door, and then she knew nothing but that she was standing once more face to face with Walter Cleasby.

Darkness had gathered outside, and a storm was rising. The candle on the table was flaring in the draught from the window. Christina came forward a few steps, and then she stood quite still. She did not speak, or even try to speak; neither did she give any sign or cry. She let him take her hands in his,

but they were passive in his clasp. There could be no ordinary greeting; and as to the rest, it seemed to her that everything was over, and that there remained nothing more to be said or done. She could see him quite distinctly by the light of the candle on the table, and she looked at him with wide-open, tearless eyes; but her mouth did not quiver, nor did her hands tremble in his.

"Christina," he said, "I thought you would say Yes. They have told you. I should have gone down with a much lighter heart if I thought you had been quite clear of the ship."

He waited for an answer, but she made no attempt to speak; she hardly heard him.

"I have been waiting to come for days," he went on; "but it was better not until I knew there was no escape. Our course has been a rough one; you will do best to forget it. One month, Christina, ought not to cloud your whole life."

Then again he paused, but nothing broke the stillness—a stillness which was becoming intolerable

to him. He had known that he would have much to bear, he had known that it would be painful, but he had not known that it would be like this. He had imagined how it would be ; he had thought of her in her passionate grief and indignation ; but there are depths which no storm can stir, which know neither tears nor lamentations.

He dropped her hands and staggered back against the wall, for a sort of giddiness had come over him.

“Are we to part like this?” he said ; “is this to be the end? Am I to carry away this memory, and never see your smile again?”

It was not cruelty or selfishness ; it was but the natural longing and the fleeing from the pain ; it was rather an entreaty than a reproach, and it was not made in vain. What was it that even at that moment enabled her to thrust her misery aside? Was it the memory of the past? was it the pity, was it the love with which, God help her, she loved him still? Suddenly, as she stood looking at him,

the intensity of her gaze wavered, the colour rose in her face, she threw her head a little back with the old proud freedom of action he knew so well, and the smile which he had longed after illuminated her face. The outline was altered; there were the dark lines of watching and sorrow under her eyes, and they themselves had a pathetic look of hopeless longing, giving unconscious expression to the unquenchable yearning for what she had lost; but yet misery had not dimmed, even now, the charm of her winning smile, nor changed aught of the sweetness that hovered round her mouth.

How was it, that at that moment he seemed all at once to recognize what he had lost—lost by his own fault? As she stood there, so like to what she had been and yet so changed, with that look of glorified trust more radiant than even in her days of happiness, everything else was for once swallowed up in the thought of his own pain.

“Christina,” he said, and the name came like a cry from his lips; “Christina, must we part even now?”



He had not meant to say it. He had thought that he had conquered, and that no such question could ever again pass his lips; yet now the possibility he thought he had put far from him presented itself again irresistibly to his imagination. He had done the thing deliberately; he had imagined that he was doing it for her sake; and yet now, when he stood face to face with her, a misgiving flashed across him whether he were indeed doing it for her or for himself. He had not feared to look into his motives; he had thought that he was acting upon a right principle; he had looked at the future and counted the cost. Yes, it was for her sake. But was it for her sake alone? Some power external to himself, whose promptings he could hardly comprehend, called upon him at this moment to thrust his principles aside, and he cried out in obedience to the commands of a divine instinct, and asked if there was no retreat open to him.

It was but a moment; the smile had faded

quickly away, but the effort Christina had made had done something to lighten the iron weight which was pressing upon her heart, and silent tears rising from the very depths of her desolation rolled slowly down her pale cheeks. She could not now go back; his words, born, as she knew, but of the impulse of the moment, could not undo what had been done. Had she not already enough to bear? Why should this also be laid upon her? why should he, as it were, put the sword into her own hand to strike the fatal blow? And this when she would have given her life that she might still be his, and encountered gladly everything that the future might bring, to be able to say, "Take me with you;" and yet she could not do it.

"You have said it." This was the first time she had spoken, and he started and trembled at the sound of her voice.

He had said it—was it that alone which made an escape impossible? had he indeed closed the gates against himself? It seemed all at once as if

the cherubim with the flaming sword, who barred his backward path, was but an image of himself; and if so, was there not even now a possible salvation? Was it not open to him now to say, "Christina, forgive me; I cannot live without you?" He had almost said it, he had almost thrown himself at her feet; but by one supreme effort he grasped again his hardly-won resolution. It was a momentous crisis in both their lives; not because their love was slipping from them, not because a girl's heart was breaking, but because he was, for the last time, shutting his heart against the love and the life he might have won—and was with them casting his salvation behind him. The command which must one day come to us all had come to him: "Choose ye this day whom ye will serve;" and he had chosen, not God, but Mammon. As he turned again to spaek, his good angel drew far from him

"You are right," he said; "it is best for you: perhaps it is best for us both. You will try, Christina, say that you will try, to forget."

“It will not hurt me to remember,” she said : but nothing was so sad as the sweet ringing voice which would yet be gay if it might.

He walked away from her to the window. The wind was blowing in the creepers, and their long tendrils swept against the panes. There were wavering shadows on the grass, and a pale moon showed herself among the driving clouds. Christina had sunk down on a low couch by the fire, and bowed her head in her hands. There was a long silence. He had meant to spare her all the pain that he might ; he had meant to comfort her, but the sense of his powerlessness oppressed him so, that it was some minutes before he could speak again.

“It seems impossible to us now,” he said, at last, and he came and sat down by her ; “but you know, Christina, people say that time heals all sorrows, and even you, my queen,” and his love stirred within him at the old fond word, “even you may find that it is true.”

She looked up, but as she would have spoken

the words died upon her lips. He forgot, in their present nearness, the barrier which he was raising up between them; he forgot that they were henceforth to be strangers; for the moment he forgot all except her misery and his own.

“Christina, speak to me,” he said. “We cannot part like this. Tell me my love has been a curse, but speak to me.” She turned her pale face towards him, and her sad, wondering eyes met his.

“Walter,” she said, softly, holding out her hands. She said only the one word; but after that he could not doubt that he was forgiven.

“Oh, Christina,” he said, “is there nothing I can say or do? It would be easier for you if you could think it was not I, but our unlucky fate. Is there anything I can say?”

“Not now, Walter,” she said, but very gently.

He was right; if she could have only thought that it was not his doing, all the rest would have been as nothing; but she could not see the necessity which had shown itself so clearly to his eyes; she

only knew that she could not make him understand. He rose again as she spoke, and turned from her; and as he turned she thought that her words were driving him away, and at the thought that the parting was coming so quickly upon her she started up too, and reached her hands after him, with a low cry, which could not be repressed. It was the first sign which she had given, and the appeal was not in vain. It restored his nerve, and forced him to summon up self-control.

“You will let Gusty come and see you sometimes,” he said gently. “It has been hard for her too. Christina, my loved one, I have brought nothing but misery upon you; do not let me hear that it cannot be undone. Think that I am dead. It will be the same, only that I am leaving paradise behind instead of entering upon it.”

“Where, Walter?” she said, with a trembling longing to know where he was going.

“To London, now, for Gusty’s marriage; and then to America.”

“To-night?” she said; and a faintness came over her as she uttered the word. He saw that she could not bear much more; that she was physically incapable of the continued strain; that it would be best if the end should come, and yet that she should not know it.

“No, not to-night,” he said; “to-morrow evening I shall see you again.” But he could not deceive her by such a pretence as this; as they stood together in the silent room, with the storm raging outside, and the candle-light full upon his pale face, she could not but read the truth in his eyes. Silently she put her hands in his, and solemnly, in the stillness, they kissed each other for the last time.

She stood motionless as he turned away, as the sound of his receding footsteps echoed on the stones, as the door was shut behind him; and then, though the wind was roaring in the chimney, she heard him tramp across the garden and swing the gate behind him. Trembling, she sank down on a seat and shivered from head to foot.



Janet, coming in an hour later, found her still there, a crouched-up figure beside the dying embers in the grate. Christina looked up, roused at her entrance, and clutching at the table to help herself, rose slowly to her feet.

“My head aches, Janet,” she said; “say that I am gone to bed.” But when she tried to cross the floor she staggered, and would have fallen if Janet had not thrown her arm round her.

“Why, Miss Christina,” said the woman, “you ain’t fit to walk upstairs. You rest here a bit till I fetch you a drop of wine and get your bed warmed; you’re perished away with the cold;” and she put Christina back into her chair, and kneeling down before her, began to rub her cold hands in hers.

“Don’t call anyone,” said Christina; and then she lay back, unable to say more, her soft masses of brown hair falling about her, shadowing the deathly paleness of her face. Janet understood as well as if she had been told what had happened;

she called Captain Cleasby hard names in her own mind as she busied herself about Christina ; but she had her own views about the proper means to be employed for her restoration, and she had no desire to call in Mrs. North, to make a work "and worrit the life that was left out of her," as she said to herself. She had known Christina since she was a little girl, and in her stern way she was fond of her ; but she neither liked nor respected Mrs. North. She lighted a fire in the bedroom, she warmed the bed, and then, when Christina had swallowed the wine she brought her, she put her strong arm round her and almost carried her upstairs.

"There, my dear," she said, when she had, as she expressed it, made her all comfortable, and had shaded the candle which stood on the little table at the foot of the bed so that it should not dazzle her eyes—"there, Miss Christina, if you was to sleep a bit I should say it would be the best thing for you, and I won't say nothing more

to Mrs. North than that you've got a headache and want to be quiet. I'll bring you some arrow-root or something by and by."

Christina was lying motionless upon the white pillows with her eyes shut, but she opened them when Janet spoke to her.

"Thank you, dear Janet," she said, with a strange little smile which brought tears into Janet's eyes.

She went away, leaving Christina, as she hoped, to sleep. Nor had her efforts been made in vain. The strain upon Christina's mental and physical powers could not continue unabated; she must lose consciousness before she could again face the suffering. For some time she lay with her large dark eyes fixed upon the opposite wall, but at length they closed softly, and she slept.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

WHEN Christina awoke it was early morning. The storm was still raging outside, but the rain had ceased. Gradually, as she lay alone in the darkness, the events of the day before came back to her mind, and she recoiled from them, and pressed her face upon the pillow, suppressing a moaning cry which the recollection awakened. Was it all over? No, not yet; for a yearning had seized upon her so forcibly that she was powerless against it. She must see him once more, if only she could gather sufficient physical strength for the effort. She raised herself in the bed, and felt with a thrill of excitement that she was strengthened by the past hours of sleep. She would lie still, and then

later she would be able to do it. She lay motionless whilst the slow hours passed, and gradually the grey light of morning crept into the room, and then there was a stir in the house, and Janet came to light her fire and bring her breakfast. Her grandfather had passed a restless night, she told her, and Mrs. North had been sitting up with him, and now she had gone to rest. Christina drank the cup of coffee which Janet brought her, and tried to eat, but could not. Inaction was becoming intolerable. The stillness of the house oppressed her. She said she was much better, almost well, and dressed herself in spite of Janet's remonstrances. She walked to the window and looked out on the dreary November landscape, gathering her resolution and shaping her purpose. Her grandfather was dozing, and her mother still in her own room: there was nothing to hinder the accomplishment of her desire.

It was still early when she went down into the kitchen. The fire had been lighted, and the wood

was blazing and crackling, but everything else was chill and comfortless, and a cold autumnal mist was hanging over the world outside. Christina shut the door behind her and walked across the room.

“Janet,” she said, hoarsely, laying hold of the woman’s shoulder as if to steady herself, “hush, speak gently, I don’t want to disturb anyone. Janet, you will do something for me. Go up to the Park and tell me—what time—it will be? You understand,” she said; but in truth the woman was frightened and bewildered, and made no answer —“what time Captain Cleasby will leave,” said Christina, forcing herself to speak plainly; and Janet, alarmed at her looks and manner, could give no denial.

Of course she could do it, only some instinct made her keep her errand a secret from Mrs. North.

When she came back Christina was waiting for her at the gate. There was something so desolate

in her attitude as she stood there in the cold wind which whirled the dead leaves about her feet, that Janet would have given some expression to her fears and compassion but for the almost cold determination on her face.

“By the half-past four o'clock express from East-down station, Miss Christina,” she said.

Christina went back into the house without further questionings. She went back into the house and shut herself up in her room, and sat there without moving, with her watch in her hand, waiting with feverish impatience for the moments to pass, yet feeling that each was putting further from her that which had constituted her life. The time when she could look upon his home and feel that he was there was slipping from her; he was even now so near that a word from her might bring him to her in a few minutes, and yet so far that no such word would ever reach him again. Her past and future were forgotten in one absorbing desire. If only she could see him once more; not face to



face, not to ask any question or answer any appeal, not for any word or look that might be directed to herself. All that was past: there was nothing more to be said—they had parted, and parted for ever. But yet she yearned to look upon him once more, if only for one moment; she longed for it as she might have longed to see him after death; and if he had been dead, could he have been more completely separated from her than now? She told herself again and again that he would have been nearer to her then. Then it would have been so inevitable, and he would have nothing to do with it; but now it had been his will that they should part. He had done it gently, she knew that he had done it with pain and grief; but yet he had done it, and did not wish it undone. “If he had died,” she said to herself again and again, “he would still have been my own.” And yet she had not wished that it might have been so. She wished that he might still be prosperous and happy, and she knew that life was dear to him. He was

suffering now, but he would not suffer always ; and for herself, she thought that she could bear it, if only she could look upon him once more. In the bewilderment of her grief and pain, when the spirit of acquiescence had found no place, when as yet she could not grasp the whole extent of her misfortune, her mind settled upon this one point as the only thing that yet remained to be desired—the only object which could be of any moment ; the thing in the whole world which mattered anything to her. She could not have borne that he should speak to her : she could not have spoken to him again except under compulsion. But she did desire to see him once more, and the desire had superseded everything else, so that it seemed as if she lived for it alone.

When she saw that it was one o'clock she went downstairs, knowing that it was the dinner hour. She smiled a little when they asked her how she was and rallied her on her unusual punctuality. She did not notice her mother's agitation, nor the nervous

flush upon her face ; she did not perceive that even Mrs. Oswestry's composed manner was different from usual. She was striving in the strength of desperation to appear as if all was as usual with her, but it never occurred to her that they might be pre-occupied with something of so engrossing an interest that it had for the time thrown her into the background, even at this crisis of her life.

"I think that I shall go out this afternoon," she said ; "it is so long since I have been out of the house."

"Yes, you had much better go out," said Mrs. North, eagerly ; "certainly it will do you good ; you have been shut up too long : it is that which makes you so pale."

"It is a miserable day," said Mrs. Oswestry, doubtfully, looking towards the window.

"Christina never minds that," said her mother, quickly : and when Christina had left the room she added fretfully, "I wish, Margaret, that you would not make objections. She had much better be out of the house. Every additional person makes an

additional fuss, and if there is to be a scene, we shall manage it much better without Christina."

Mrs. Oswestry made no answer, but she sat thoughtful, thinking for the moment not so much of the interview which was coming between her father and the sister who had so long been divided from him and from them all, but rather of the girl for the first time going out to face again the desolate world.

It was only four o'clock when Christina turned out of the gate of the White House and took her way across the heath; but the grey masses of low-hanging clouds had already obscured the wintry daylight, and a mist was rising from the ground. She knew the narrow footpath which led across the heath; she could see already the lights of the station twinkling in the distance, and she walked with the unnatural rapidity of excitement, hurting her feet against the stones, stumbling over the obstacles in her way, yet taking no heed of anything but of the lights in the distance which led her on. She

had formed no distinct plan, but she thought that she would see him and yet that he should not see her. She understood why he had chosen to start from the little station at East-down; he was not known there as he was known at Overton. This circumstance was favourable also to her purpose: in the darkness no one there would recognize her.

The train was not due for ten minutes or more when at last she reached the white palings which enclosed the line; she turned in and sank down wearily on a bench upon the platform.

“Any luggage, if you please, Miss? Where are you for?”

Christina shook her head, and after an instant gathered her breath to speak.

“I came—to rest,” she said; “I am not going anywhere.”

The man gazed at her, surprised, and then suddenly a compassionate look awoke upon his hard, weather-beaten face. Christina got up hastily, stung by the surprise and unable to bear the compassion.

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She pushed open the door of the tiny waiting-room and went in. The porter followed her, but put no further questions. He was a kindly man, and he had perceived that she shunned observation. He put coals upon the fire and stirred it into a blaze. He was not without experience, and had determined in his own mind that she was not only weary but in trouble. Christina sank down upon the chair he had put for her, but she did not think of drawing it near to the fire, or of making any attempt to warm herself, though her lips were white and her hands cold and trembling. After a few minutes had passed, she stood up, and, leaning against the wall for support, placed herself so that, standing in the shadow of the room, she commanded a view of the platform. Then she waited. Presently she heard the sound of wheels; luggage was brought on to the platform; an old woman with a basket was waiting for the train, holding a little boy by the hand. She could hear her talking to him through the badly closed window. Another minute and other

wheels grated upon the gravel; the horse was suddenly pulled up, and her heart stood still as Walter Cleasby came on to the platform.

He walked along it smoking a cigar, with his hands thrust into his pockets. By the gaslight outside she saw him clearly. He was pale and worn, but his look told rather of past than of present suffering. She felt instinctively that for him the worst was over; he was entering upon a new life—a life which he had in some sort chosen for himself; the pain, which with her had but begun, he would, when he left Overton, make a not altogether unsuccessful effort to put behind him. He turned into the station and she heard him ask for his ticket, and shrank closer into her corner and trembled with an unreasonable fear lest he should enter the room and discover her presence. Then he walked out again and entered into conversation with the porter. It was but a natural, trivial incident, yet his friendly unconcerned tone cut her to the heart. It was horrible to see him so near and so unspeakably



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distant; yet she would have held the moments if she might, and felt a sickening dread of the instant when he should pass for ever from her sight. The red lights showed themselves in the distance, slow and steady and irresistible in their approach; the rush of the engine grew nearer and nearer. Walter threw away his cigar and turned for a moment, looking back at the station, so that, although he did not know it, he was face to face with Christina. Was it instinct; was it that curious sensation of being watched which brought a shadow across his face, or was it the memory of pain and the pang of regret? Her sad, longing eyes looking out of the darkness, rested for the last time upon his fair, distinguished face. She saw the slight contraction on his forehead and the flash of pain across his sensitive mouth. Her straining eyes followed him until the door was shut, and even then she remained gazing out into the night after the long line of carriages had passed into the distance, and the sound of the swift-rushing wheels had died away.

For the time she was lost to all consciousness of her surroundings. She had fallen back into her chair and sat with her eyes looking vacantly before her, her hands hanging down by her side and her hair pushed back from her face.

Her friend the porter came and looked at her, and went away shaking his head, to take counsel with the ticket collector. "I'm afeard the poor young lady may be out of her mind," he said, in his perplexity; "and then again it may be only a long journeying and distress of mind." The other man could offer no solution of the enigma, but his experience was more available, inasmuch as he had been married for ten years to a nervous and hysterical wife. "A glass of water is allays of use to 'em," he suggested; "they can drink it or put it on their heads; it's what my missis'is allays the better for—if I was you, Jim, I'd take her a glass." Fortified with this practical advice, "Jim" again went into the little dingy waiting-room and put a glass of water down upon the table before the pale

mute face of its inhabitant, muttering some apologies for his intrusion. Christina gave a slight shiver and mechanically put out her hand to take it. But as she would have raised it to her lips it slipped from between her fingers, the glass crashed against the table, broke into fragments, and the water was poured down on the floor.

The shock, trivial although it was, had been too great for her overstrained nerves, the shattered glass set loose the tears which had not flowed for the pains which had wrung her heart, and suddenly she burst out into violent hysterical sobs.

"Now don't ye take on so, don't ye, Miss," said Jim, as he went down on his knees to pick up the pieces; "lie down by the fire now and rest a bit, and I'll get my missis to bring you a cup o' tea as ull be better nor that cold water."

Christina had still strength enough left to exercise some self-control; she lay upon the miserable little hard sofa and stifled the sobs which might have in some sort comforted her if only she could have

given way to them, while the kind-hearted porter made his way to the little cottage on the other side of the road, and brought his wife and the cup of tea which she had been keeping hot for him. Christina had in some sort recovered herself; the sobs which had alarmed him had given place to a strange composure, which he rejoiced at in his ignorance, and by the time Christina had swallowed her cup of tea she was able to stand and declare that she was quite equal to the walk across the heath.

"I have been very troublesome," she said with a smile; "how good you have been to me, you kind people! I shall come and see you another day and thank you better. No; I would rather go alone. I know my way quite well."

"However we could let her go alone, Jim, is what I can't understand," said the porter's wife to her husband afterwards; "my mind misgives me that it weren't what we ought to ha' done; but there, she seemed strong enough when once she was on her feet."

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It was true that Christina had turned out of the little station walking firmly with her face against the wind. She had felt the necessity of avoiding companionship. Now that the first excitement was past, she began to dread recognition, feeling vaguely that she had perhaps been wrong in what she had done, desiring at least that it should not be known. The effort she had made for self-control had for the moment braced her nerves and given her strength; but after the first two hundred yards her steps began to flag. The darkness had deepened, the mist had turned to driving rain. The great level heath was spread all round her. She wandered from the path, entangling her feet in the heather, and often stopping from utter weariness to gather breath to proceed. It was only a mile from East-down to the White House, yet it was more than an hour from the time she had left the station before she came out upon the road, and dead to all consciousness except that of physical pain and weariness, dragged herself up the steps which led

to the garden. She passed slowly along the pebbled walk, and saw the firelight shining from the windows. At least she was at home again. It was not that she wanted help or sympathy; she could not have understood it if it had been offered to her; she hardly knew what it was that she had suffered; her mental powers were benumbed, and with them her capacity for mental suffering; but she felt that she was cold and wet and trembling, and had a half-conscious longing for shelter and light and warmth. She opened the hall door for herself; she saw the firelight glowing in the kitchen, and went towards it, utterly insensible to all but her physical needs. The kitchen was empty. Christina, creeping towards the warmth like a wounded thing, sat down on the floor before the fire, leaning her head back against the cushioned arm-chair which stood beside it. And the crickets chirruped on the hearth in their unconsciousness, and the kettle was singing, as the fire blazed fitfully and the shadows danced upon the wall.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

IN the meantime, so exciting an event had come to disturb the monotony of the sick room and engage the attention of the household, that no one except Janet had had time to give a thought to Christina, or disturb themselves at her long-continued absence. Mrs. Oswestry had undertaken to break her sister's arrival to the old man; and then, taking his gloomy silence for assent, she had divulged her presence in the house, and asked that she might bring her to him.

It was a strange scene in the shaded room—the old man lying flushed and eager upon his bed; Mrs. Oswestry in her long black dress, outwardly quiet and composed, as she stood a little behind



him, yet with the look of anxiety which made lines upon her usually serene forehead ; and then the opening door and the little bright-faced woman, with the tears in her brown eyes and the tremble in her voice, who came forward with eager timidity, doubtful of her reception, and yet longing to be forgiven—so like to the little Lotty he had lost sixteen years ago, and yet so different.

There was a little pause, and then he held out his shaking hands to her.

“I did it for the best, Lotty,” he said with an effort ; “God knows I did it for the best. It was a terrible blow to me, and I could not forget it. You’re come at last only to see me die ; but it comforts me to see you.”

And then the little trembling, impulsive woman burst into tears ; and Mrs. Oswestry, knowing that now there would be nothing more for her to say or do, had left them alone together.

It had been an anxious day ; she and her sister-in-law sat in the oak parlour, more drawn together

than they had ever been before, in their mutual anxiety, and even now fearing the effect of the agitation upon the old man's enfeebled frame.

"I am sure I feel it as much as if she were my own sister," said Mrs. North; "it is trying for her, poor thing, after so long a time. He was gentler than I had thought he would be."

"He is softened by his illness," said Mrs. Oswestry; and then they talked on, of the change in Lotty and of what she had been as a girl, and waited for her to come down to them, and forgot Christina.

Mr. Warde came in presently to ask if Mr. North would like to see him, and by that time Madame Ricardo had come downstairs. Her father had grown restless, she said; and Janet, who was a less exciting nurse, had gone to get him his soup; and presently she would go to him again.

"Where is Christina?" asked Mr. Warde, suddenly.

It was an ordinary question enough; the only wonder was that no one had thought of asking it

before ; and yet for some reason or other it startled them.

"Christina ! Oh, she is sōmewhere !" said her mother, nervously ; "she cannot have gone far ; she was walking this afternoon."

"But surely not so late as this," said Mr. Warde.

"You will forgive me for not asking about her before ?" said Madame Ricardo, fearing that she had shown an unkind oblivion of her niece ; "but, you know, in the hurry of the moment and my dear father——"

"Yes, yes ; Mary understands," said Mrs. Oswestry, with involuntary uncalled-for impatience, "only one cannot help wondering a little ; of course she cannot have gone far ; but still, she has been very unhappy of late, and naturally——"

And at that point Janet made her appearance at the door, with a manner so hasty and abrupt, and unlike to her usual grim servant-like demeanour, that they stopped speaking, and turned at once to her.

“Miss Christina is come in, ma’am,” she cried breathlessly. “Would you please to come and see her; she is lying in the kitchen, and the Lord only knows what’s come over her.”

They rose simultaneously, and made a little procession after her along the passage, eager and excited, yet not knowing what they feared, until they followed her into the kitchen, and stood still at the sight of Christina.

She was lying on the floor, with one arm twisted round the chair and her head resting upon it. She was just as she was when she came in, still in her damp clothes, but her hat was pushed off and her hair tossed about her, loosened and in disorder. Her large dark eyes had an unconscious look, and her cheeks were flushed.

“She was asleep when I come in,” said Janet. But they were looking at Christina, and no one answered her. In the silence, Mrs. Oswestry went nearer, and bent down towards her.

“Will you come with me, Christina?” she said,

gently ; “you are tired. Will you come to bed?”

“No, no, not with you ;—no, I can’t come.”

What was there in the sweet plaintive voice which sent a shudder through the room?

“The great lights coming—coming through the darkness!” said Christina, gazing intently into the distance—“coming so fast, nearer and nearer; they are coming now; they hurt my eyes,” she said, and then she put up her hands and pressed her slender fingers over her eyes. They stood silent in their awe. The clergyman, who was in a way used to it, who had seen so many painful things in his life, yet could not at this moment have commanded his voice to speak; even Mrs. Oswestry, turned pale. The stranger, who did not know what it meant, shrank back nervously, and the mother burst into frightened tears.

“They are coming still,” cried Christina, shuddering; “so fast, so near,—they are burning.”

Mrs. Oswestry knelt down and put her arm round her.

"Look, Christina," she said, "here are no lights. Open your eyes and see. You are tired and ill, or you would not see them."

Christina opened her eyes with mechanical obedience, and gazed at her aunt, but with no gleam of recognition.

"I am not ill—not tired," she said, with the soft low laugh of delirium. After that she said no more, but subsided into languor and unconsciousness; and they lifted her, and carried her to her room.

The subdued gloom of sickness settled upon the White House. People went and came, noiselessly, with anxious faces, and spoke together in whispers. The old man was fading gradually away, and Christina lay day after day upon her little white bed; her eyes bright with fever, with no look of recognition for any one, talking at intervals in her wanderings in a sweet, low voice, of other

days, of the summer and death and heaven, blending together in her unconsciousness the things which make up the mystery, sadness, and sweetness of our life. Her aunt Margaret rarely left her; for Mrs. North was unequal to much nursing, and her father had his other daughter to attend upon him. Lotty had always been his favourite, although she had disappointed him, and now she was more to him than the others. He asked often for Christina, but he was satisfied when they told him she was not dangerously ill, only too ill to come to him. He was so near to death himself that his comprehension was limited to a vague sense of the coming change, and to a perception of the things he saw and heard. The doctor said he might pass away any day or week, or, again, he might linger on for months; but if he had any arrangements to be made they should be made at once. It was then that they first thought of sending for Bernard. His grandfather had been in a sort of way proud of him, and then, he was his only



near male relation. The same letter which told Bernard of Christina's illness brought him the summons to his grandfather's death-bed.

He was sitting in the great office-room of Messrs. Bartlett at his desk, among the other clerks, when his letter was handed to him. They long remembered the look upon his face as he read it and crushed it in his hands. He staggered to his feet, and went out into the air. When they heard that he had gone home because his grandfather was dying, they wondered amongst themselves.

"Who would have thought it would have been such a shock to him?" they said; "a grandfather is not like one's father, and he must have been an old man."

They could not know that it was not until Bernard had thrown himself into the train, and taken out his letter again, that he remembered to reproach himself for the secondary place which his grandfather had taken in his thoughts. He was fond of his grandfather, who had been associated with

his boyhood and his home, and had that tender unreasonable hold upon his heart which belongs to a long-familiar presence ; yet his natural grief had for the time been pushed out of its place by the blow he had received. Christina lying in unconsciousness—lying between life and death ! It was cruel ; it was a mistake ; it was impossible. And then he thought of her misery, as he had often thought of it before, knowing what it was that had done it.

“The cursed scoundrel !” he said to himself, setting his teeth and clenching his hands.

They had not led him to fear any immediate danger to his grandfather, and when he drove up to the door of the White House and saw the blinds drawn, it never occurred to him that, after all, he might have come too late ; he had thought that he would be able at least to say some word of gratitude, and receive the old man’s blessing ; it was only when his mother met him in the hall that he read the truth in her eyes.

“It was very peaceful and quiet ; at ten o’clock this morning,” she said, drawing him into the study ; “we had not thought it would have been so soon : but it was sudden at the last.”

“I wish that I had been here. I wished to see him again,” said Bernard, with tears in his eyes.

“My dear boy, you could have done no good. He remembered you : he named you just before the end : he said, ‘God bless you, Margaret, and your boy.’”

“And Christina ?”

Mrs. Oswestry’s heart was yearning over her boy ; it was three months since she had seen him, and he was all that she had in the world ; now, at the moment of her trouble, when she was worn by watching and perturbed and sad, her heart was aching for a caress and a loving word, and it was hard to feel that she was forgotten in the feverish anxiety with which he put his question. It was hard ; yet even now there was nothing but pity and love in her voice.

"There is little change," she said; "but they think that the fever is less. She knows no one, but she does not wander in her talk as she did at first. For the last twenty-four hours she has not spoken. They think it is a better sign. My son," she said, with serious tenderness, pressing his hands in hers, "God has willed that you should suffer."

"Forgive me, mother," he said, with sudden relenting and self-reproach.

Mrs. Oswestry asked no questions and made no answer, but they sat in that silence of unspoken sympathy to which words can add nothing.

He felt guilty towards her, knowing in himself that she could not be to him what he was to her. With Bernard it had not been a sudden revelation; the spell had been upon him since the time when Christina was a little, slender, upright girl, with thick waves of brown hair hanging down below her waist; but it was the first time that Mrs. Oswestry had seen its power so clearly; and though she understood it, and recognized the inevitableness of

the change, her heart ached over the sense of something gone from her.

They all stayed on together at the White House. Mrs. North begged that she might not be left alone, and the sisters did not like to be separated. Bernard also could not be spared. He undertook all the arrangements for the funeral: he sat with his mother when she was not with Christina; and whilst she was in the sick room he would wander aimlessly about, not able to tear himself from the place, yet unable to occupy himself in any way. Sometimes he brought out his drawings, but the lines were unsatisfactory, and his faculty of composition had deserted him. Madame Ricardo was the only person who maintained any cheerfulness. Her father's death had shocked and distressed her, but it was now a week since it had taken place; the funeral was over, and her volatile nature could not long remain seriously impressed. It was sad that Christina should be so ill; but she felt sure that she would be better soon. "Girls at that age suffer very much, but they

get over it and marry other young men after all," as she said to Bernard with cheerful confidence. Even the sweet-tempered Bernard turned away angrily: he told his mother that it was desecration for her to take Christina's name upon her lips: which was ungrateful of him, for his aunt had taken a fancy to his manly manners and his handsome looks, and would have been glad to make friends with him. Perhaps her words angered him the more in that they were the coarse and uncalled-for expression of a thought which had for one moment flashed across him when he heard that the engagement with Captain Cleasby was broken off—a sudden thought, which had brought the blood in a rush of shame and pain and recollection to his face, and which yet had set his heart beating with a hope and a longing. It was forgotten now; forgotten in that anxious, feverish watching whilst Christina lay in her unconsciousness, on the borders of life and death. The two were striving together in that solemn stillness of unconsciousness—striving in a desperate



struggle. But she was young; even now the vital power was strong within her, and she did not die. She was called back to life; back to the springs which must awaken hopes in other hearts; back to the summers with their pomps and splendours and their blaze of cruel sunshine; back to the red-denning, yellowing leaves of autumn; back to the chill darkness of winter; back to the empty world. She had stretched out her hands to the great Deliverer: the Angel of Death had stood within the room; her feet had touched the cold waters, and then something had drawn her back into the jar and tumult and memories of earth. Her time was not come; she must wait before she could enter into her rest. Was it perhaps that she had not earned it? Was it that her life must have a purer ring and a more perfect harmony before it could make music with other lives around the heavenly throne? or was it that a poor young heart was breaking at the thought that she was passing from his sight, and God had pity,



and would not send out His angel as yet to bring her home ?

Slowly, as the days succeeded one another, Christina gathered strength. Slowly the consciousness of the present was re-awakened. Her eyes ceased to wander ; and rested with a look of recognition upon familiar objects. She was as yet quite passive ; she made no effort to speak ; she did not answer when they spoke to her ; but she watched the gleams of sunlight which crept into the darkened room. She knew that her mother was standing by her bed ; she heard the sounds of stirring life in the early morning, and at night she shut her eyes from the flickering fire-light and wearily slept again.

Then there came a day when, in answer to the usual question "Are you better?" she could smile and faintly answer "Yes." It was the first conscious word which she had uttered ; her mother started as at a voice from the grave, and would have betrayed her agitation but for Mrs. Oswestry's warning hand upon her arm.

“That is right, my dear,” she said in her unruffled tones; “now you can sleep;” and Christina, too languid to say more, shut her eyes, though not to sleep. They did not think it strange at the moment; but as time passed on, and she took food and medicine without comment or inquiry, and let the little events of the day—the gifts of fruit or flowers the neighbours sent her, her aunt’s presence, and the doctor’s visit all pass unnoticed, even Madame Ricardo began to feel uneasy.

They thought that it was weakness of body and deadness of mind; they did not know that it was a sickening dread of anything that might awaken recollections, which made her so passive and gave her such a shrinking from exertion. She had known long before this (long at least it seemed to her) the bitterness of the first awakening to the knowledge that the love in which she had trusted was slipping from her; she had seen the death of hope, and suffered the anguish of parting; she had faced it, and borne it with her eyes open; but now she

was to feel the dead-weight of a living sorrow, into which she dared not look. She knew that she had suffered; she knew that she had been near to death; but as yet she had not looked back upon the cause. For the present the past was sealed to her. She knew that she had had a past; she was slowly passing out from a dreadful dream; her physical force was exhausted; her mental energies were weak; she had only sufficient strength to remember that she must, if possible, forget. There was a chamber in her mind crowded with memories whose threshold she dared not pass; there was a name she must not breathe and an image she must not recall. She felt vaguely that she was safer in darkness and solitude.

The familiar faces, the necessary questions and replies—yes, even the sunshine and the blowing winds and all the sights and sounds of earth, would come to her burthened with the memory of the past; that which she dared not remember could not be altogether forgotten. No, not even though she lay

in darkness and silence shutting it out ; for, nevertheless, as her strength increased, gradually gleams of light found their way into that dark chamber of her heart.

“We must accustom her by degrees to more exertion;” so Dr. Evans said. “Has she any friend who could come to her? She might begin to sit up a little to-morrow. At any rate you might draw the curtains and let her see a little more of the world.”

Hitherto, in their dread of exciting her brain, they had kept the room almost dark by day as it was by night. That evening they drew aside the window curtain, so that when Christina awoke she should see out on to the heath, and the bare trees stretching their leafless branches against the sky, and the hill rising in the distance.

Christina was alone when she awoke. They had been sitting up with her during the first part of the night ; but she had slept quietly, and they had not been afraid to leave her. It was still early morning

when she opened her eyes to the sight once so familiar and now so strangely unaccustomed. A pale rosy light shone through the window and slowly spread itself over the wall before her. Christina turned from it, and a sick, faint feeling came over her. Was this the dawn that she had so often watched, standing bareheaded on the heath, with the morning air blowing about her; which had made her heart beat with its promise of happiness and shone to her through happy tears? Oh that the sun might not shine, that the light might not kill her with its revelations and remembrances! Yet this day must dawn, like so many other weary despairing days, in brightness and grace, sending floods of sunshine over the dreary heath, filling the world with light and glory. Perhaps among all the pangs which strike from without upon hearts wrung by human sorrow, there is none which strike so keenly as the desolation and the beauty of a dawning day. Christina could no longer hope to remain unconscious. Recollections must return; they could no longer be

driven away by physical weakness ; they must be encountered in the strength of that heavenly grace for which she in her weakness had striven. She had been tossed upon a tempestuous sea : the harbour lights were shining far in the distance : darkness was around her : and she was sinking : but as in her despair she let go the helm and clasped her hands to pray, dimly she could discern the Spirit of God moving upon the waters.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

CHRISTMAS came and went, with its bells and its holly and its merriment ; but the White House had nothing to do with these things. Christina was so much better that Mrs. Oswestry had gone back to the Homestead, taking Bernard with her ; they thought that Christina would soon be able to leave her room, and then the fewer people there were in the house the better. She had not as yet seen Bernard, and for the present they feared to bring anyone to her who could remind her of old times. Her aunt Lotty was a new element, and she was her best companion, with her chatter and her kindness, which was not sympathy ; she knew nothing except the bare outline of Christina's history, and she could be cheerful in her persuasion that the poor child



only wanted a little diversion, and time and change of scene, to get over her morbid fancies.

“You shall come home with me, Christina,” she said to her; “this England is a dismal place in winter. You shall come to feel what sunshine is. It is no use to say No, because I will not be denied. If your mother will not come, we will leave her behind. I will wait patiently till you are a little stronger, and then you shall come and see Italy and my little Berto.”

Christina shook her head gently, but made no reply. It did not matter to her; she had no desire to go, no strength to resist anything; but she felt vaguely that Italy was a long way off, too far for her to reach it.

“You need not shake your head, Christina,” said her aunt; “I am not asking you to go this minute. You are getting stronger every day, and to-morrow you are to go downstairs.”

So, gradually, Christina came back to the trivial monotony of every-day life; the silence and solitude

which had wrapped her round was over. There might be solitude and emptiness in her heart; but people came and went around her now that the old man was dead more often than they had done before, and she must learn to smile in answer to their words, and try to be grateful for returning strength, and hide the aching and the desolation as best she might.

“Bernard is at home,” her mother said to her one day; “he would have come to see you before, only we thought it might excite you; but now that you are so much better——”

“I hope that he will come,” said Christina, with a faint flush upon her face. An impassable, immeasurable gulf lay between the present moment and the time when she had seen him last: she seemed to have died and to have entered upon a new existence which had nothing to do with the passions and the joys and the emotions of life: these things were already in the far distance: they would live for ever; but she would not recall them; they were laid to rest like a forgiven sin.

Bernard came to her with a tumult in his heart ; striding over the heath with a soft wind blowing against his face. It was one of those mild January days which, even in the midst of winter, come to us with a far-off promise of spring. The snow had melted, and left the hillside green ; the little streams were flowing once more ; the fleecy clouds chased one another against a pale blue sky : there was a peaceful sweetness in the very air. They had told him she was better, and he hoped he hardly knew what. Was not all that had passed a horrible dream ? Was it not possible that it should be forgotten ? Only last spring and Christina had, as he thought, been his. Could not this spring, as it awakened her to life and strength, bring back to her the time when she had known of no other hopes but those she could share with him ? He did not put it into words ; but Christina restored to life meant the Christina of old times, whose presence and whose love had been everything to him.

She was lying on a low couch by the open window.

A glass with some spring flowers stood upon a little table near, and an open book beside it. The wind was blowing gently over her head. Her thin white hands were lying passive against the black background of her mourning dress. There was a faint colour in her cheeks; there was no look of pain upon her forehead; when she saw him a smile awoke upon her mouth. But,—oh! why had they not told him? He knelt down beside her and met her eyes;—deep, sorrowful, unimpassioned eyes, which had seen a great agony and had seen it conquered. Hopes and longings died within him; his mouth quivered, and his face turned white.

“Bernard,” she said, and stretched out one of her hands to him—and the sight of his misery, even although it still seemed far off to her, brought the tears into her eyes—“you must not look at me like that. I am much better, but they should have told you that I still look a little ghost-like.”

“You must be better,” he said, hoarsely.

“Must I? Well, yes, I think so. I have been

brought back to life." It was not the triumph of returning strength ; it was not a spontaneous expression of gratitude ; it was but the indifferent statement of a fact, or rather the calm acquiescence of resignation.

"I believe that I am content, Bernard," she said ; "I have tried to be content." Then he felt how impossible it was that she should ever be anything more.

"Christina," he said, "I had not thought—I had not known. Must it never be different ? Can nothing bring back your life to you ? It is not life only to exist : some people's lives, I know, are made up of suffering and sorrow ; but God did not mean it, He could not have meant it to be so with you."

"You mistake, Bernard," she said ; and then she paused. No one had yet referred so plainly to her misfortunes : they had avoided the subject, as if their words could either take away or add anything to what could not be altered. Christina could not have spoken of these things ; but yet Bernard's

words brought no change or pain over her face. She was thinking only how she best might comfort him, how she should answer the chord of anguish in his voice and the pleading of his eyes. "It is a new life, Bernard," she said; "I think that perhaps it is difficult for anyone who has not felt it to understand. God has willed that I should live through it. He came to me in the pain. The pain is dying, but He is near me still." She lay back with a patient smile upon her lips, and eyes that gazed as if she saw a vision. The flush of excitement with which he had spoken had passed from Bernard's face; a great pity surged up in him; and in the silence that followed the passion died out of his heart. She had entered into a peace which passed his understanding, yet he felt no longer any desire to bring her back to the hopes and joys and love of earth: to bring her back to earth, he vaguely felt, would be but to bring her back to darkness and misery and the face of death.

He sat with her for an hour or more, and they talked softly at intervals of ordinary things—of his



work, of his friends, of the garden at the Homestead, of his mother and their aunt Lotty. And the afternoon lights shone over the heath and rested on her head as Bernard sat at the window, watching.

"It is good of you to have come to me, dear Bernard; you will come again, won't you?" she said when he went away.

Of course he came again: he came with flowers or books or drawings; he read to her, he talked to her of things which still had a hold upon her heart.

"That boy of yours cares for nothing as he cares for Christina," his aunt Lotty said to his mother. "It is not many young men that would give up their time and their pleasures for her as he does: have you ever thought——"

"No, never," said Mrs. Oswestry hurriedly; "let them alone, I beg, Lotty. They were always together as children, you know; there is nothing else. It is natural enough that they should cling together now; they are both young, and we are not." She was an essentially upright woman; but at this moment she



did not speak with entire conviction; only dreading any indiscretion which might destroy the freedom of their intercourse or put a bar upon it. She did not, it is true, know of what had been; but she had guessed what he had hoped; she thought that she understood now the desire of his heart. She did not know that all that was past.

The days lengthened: the spring drew nearer, and Christina began again to move about the house. The warm weather would make her stronger, people said, and when it was a little warmer she should start for Italy. Christina did not object; if they wished it, she was willing to go. In the meantime she had resumed her ordinary occupations. She shed no tears; she made no complaints: she moved about silently for the most part: but her sweet low replies were ready, and her smile could be easily awakened. If she sometimes let her work fall upon her knees when memories crowded her heart and filled her eyes with a hopeless longing, and if she lay sleepless upon her bed at night when the moonlight fell across the

floor and when the stars faded in the grey light of the morning, no one saw and no one knew.

"Christina will soon be ready to start now, I think," said Mrs. North, one day early in February, as she came out into the garden where she was sitting with Bernard. The wind was blowing softly from the west, the green blades of crocuses were showing themselves in the border, the snowdrops were lifting up their heads under the wall. Christina was sitting on a bench in the spring sunshine, and a little smile came over her face when her mother spoke.

"Italy is a long way off," she said gently.

"You must not be so languid, Christina. Dr. Evans is always telling me that all you want is a little energy. It is unkind of you not to feel for my anxiety when you were so ill. If you understood how important it is to me that you should get quite well, you would show more energy about it, I think."

Mrs. North went back into the house, and there was a momentary silence.

"I sometimes feel as if we were children again, Bernard," she said. "Do you remember how we used to go nutting in the woods, and how happy we were? You were always so good to me."

"Yes, I remember," he said.

Such recollections had now no pain for him. It seemed to him sometimes as if he loved Christina again as he had loved her then ; loved her with the protecting tenderness of those bygone days ; as if all the short interval of passion and indignation and misery had been blotted out. He loved her still, but not as he had loved her a year ago. A great pity and the sight of a great sorrow had thrust passion and self out of sight. It thrilled him with delight to think that she would not be taken away—that they would live in the same world ; and as they sat together with her hands clasped in his, it was to him also as if the happy days of childhood had come back when the little Christina was his little love, when the earth was green and beautiful, and the rain fell softly and the sun shone ; when there was no

dazzling light nor great shadows, nor any place for passions, tumults, or alarms.

“You are changed, Bernard,” she said ; “I know you are changed ; but you are very young still.”

Yes ! he was changed since the last spring ; and yet his face was still beautiful in its youth and innocence. He was paler and thinner than he had been ; his mouth was graver and his eyes deeper, but those eyes could still flash at times with boyish spirit. He had suffered, he had conquered ; and his victory had brought him no triumph ; for it was a victory won over the passion and hope of his life : and still his faith remained unshaken ; still his trusting eyes looked on, and other hopes arose to take the place of those which could not be restored. Christina would live ; and he might join with the blessed gifts of God to bring her peace.

“You are four-and-twenty, and I am twenty,” she said again, reflectively. “It is not so very long since we were happy little children.”

“No, not long ago,” he said ; and his thoughts

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went back to those days when they had wandered among the green undergrowth under the leafy boughs with the sunlight slanting through upon their heads ; when as yet the sky was cloudless and there was no sign or threatening of the dark storm-clouds which were to rise upon the horizon and break over them, shattering their life and their happiness. And now the sun was shining again, but faintly after the storm, and destruction was all around them ; but yet their youth had triumphed, and they must still live on.

## CHAPTER XXIX.

IT was at the beginning of March that the interest of the Overton people, which had for months past been concentrated upon the White House, was diverted into another channel by the return of their Vicar and his bride. Christina was to recover after all, she had been met driving into Overton, and they saw her once more by the light of common day. They were glad, certainly, that she was not to die ; but at the same time, perhaps, they missed a little the romance of the tragedy they had expected.

“She will go to Italy, and fall in with some other young man,” they said ; “or perhaps she may marry her handsome cousin after all.” Then they went to call upon Mr. Warde’s wife, determined to keep clear of

the subject. They went to call, full of curiosity, and of anticipations which were destined to be disappointed. The little house which Mr. Warde had made his parsonage had nothing new or interesting about it. The drawing-room was furnished with severe simplicity; there were none of the pretty useless knick-knacks which seem to belong so necessarily to a bride's drawing-room; indeed, there was no attempt at ornament of any kind, except a stand of flowers in the window, and over the mantelpiece that little miniature in an oval frame of Captain Cleasby as a little boy, which had once hung over the chimney-piece at the Park. Miss Cleasby herself did not look in the least bridal; she was just the same as she had always been: she received her visitors in the same leisurely indifferent manner with which she had been wont to receive them at the Park; except that her dress was plainer, there was nothing to mark the change. Perhaps not unnaturally, the neighbours went away disappointed and affronted. Augusta's manner might suit Miss Cleasby, though it had never



made her popular ; but it was quite out of place now that she was Mr. Warde's wife, and, so to speak, one of themselves.

"I never was one to be touchy," so Mrs. Sim said to her husband ; "but really she might have been a little more civil. She never said a word about her wedding tour nor anything. I think it is very hard upon the neighbourhood when a couple set up house together without a single pretty thing to show one. I wonder where they can have put away their wedding presents. I suppose they are too good for us. I did ask her something about London and the fashions, but I declare she did not seem to know anything about it. As to her gown, I should have been ashamed to wear such a thing except in the garden ; and I had so counted on seeing some of the trousseau,"—so said poor little Mrs. Sim with regret and vexation.

"There, there, never mind, Lizzie," said Mr. Sim, who was very weak-minded about any signs of feminine distress ; "never mind about Mrs. Warde ; you

shall go up to London next time I go, and look in the shop windows and choose something pretty for yourself."

In the meantime Augusta pursued her way in entire unconsciousness of the hopes she had dashed and the impression she had made. She had chosen for herself, and she was happy in her choice. Yet she felt strangely cut off from her former life. The Park gates were shut and all the windows closed: no one had as yet taken possession of the place; she walked that way one day, and looked wistfully up the approach, and then she glanced on to the White House, and a pang shot through her. As yet she had heard nothing of Christina; she dared not go to the house; she dared not inquire. She felt that that friendship could never be renewed; that that bond had been broken for ever. Her husband had been to see the Norths, but he had not seen Christina; he brought back word that she was rapidly gaining strength, and that in a few weeks she was to start for Italy.

“She does not know that you are in the place as yet, Augusta ; her mother and aunt both think that you had better not meet. They never speak to her of the past. They do not wish to agitate her needlessly.”

Augusta acquiesced with a sigh ; she felt that she had no right to force her presence upon the Norths, and she not only refrained from going to the White House, but also took pains to avoid Christina’s haunts ; nevertheless, as it so often happens, chance brought about the meeting against which they would have guarded.

Christina had promised that Janet’s baby nephew should be her godchild. The little brown-faced creature had been brought to see her ; she had looked at it with languid amusement ; and now it was old enough to be taken to church. There had at first been no idea of her being there in person, but when the afternoon came it was so mild a day that Christina said she would hold it at the font herself. They attempted to dissuade her, but she

was gently persistent. "It will please them, I know," she said, "and I have so seldom an opportunity of pleasing anyone now."

Thus it was, that when Mr. Warde laid down his book and turned to take the child, it was Christina who stepped forward to lay it in his arms. She looked very pale, but that was perhaps partly the effect of her deep mourning. Upon the whole she was less altered than he had expected. Yet there was a slight trembling in his voice as he pronounced the blessing.

She was standing steadily ; she made the responses quite clearly ; she took the child back into her arms with a smile. What was it that made Bernard's heart sink at this moment, as she stood there so quietly, with the little white-robed creature in her arms, and the light slanting through from the painted window upon her head ? She had laid aside her invalid habits ; she was once more standing in the church, joining in the worship, giving an outward and visible sign that she could once more mingle

with the world, that she was one of the great congregation who must live and struggle and pray, not in heaven, but upon earth. And yet when she had lain back on her white pillows like one set apart, even when she was still within the sanctuary of mortal sickness, he had not felt the change and the separation so painfully ; he had not seen so clearly the change which had passed over the Christina of old times, whose feet had trod so lightly upon the earth, whose eyes had grown bright and eager with a happy pride and a girlish hope, whose heart had been ever singing to itself of visionary delights. She had risen again, she could once more stand alone, but never again as she had stood before.

He watched her anxiously, and when the service was over he followed her out into the porch. She had sunk down on the stone seat, and he saw that she drew her breath with difficulty. Standing before her, he guarded her from curious eyes, as the congregation streamed past her into the churchyard.

“Are you not ready to come home, Christina?”

said her mother, nervously. "It is growing cold, and your aunt Lotty will be waiting for us. Are you not ready to come?"

"I felt a little faint," said Christina, in a low voice; "it is over now, but I think I will rest a little longer."

"Bernard, she must not see *her*," said Mrs. North, drawing him aside, and speaking in a whisper. "She is waiting for her husband in the church. You must go and tell her, and I will take Christina home. Come, Christina," she added, "it will do you good to drive against the air."

They had thought that she could not overhear them, but her nerves were on the strain, and her faculties sharpened by excitement.

"I understand, mother," she said; "Mr. Warde's wife is with him. We will go home, but I will speak to her first."

It was at that moment that the Vicar, stepping out of the church with his wife upon his arm, came suddenly and unexpectedly upon the group.

The quaint red-brick porch was filled with the quiet grey light of afternoon ; the yew-tree spread out its dark branches against the pale sky, making a background to the girl's slight, upright figure, as she stood with clasped hands, and eyes that shone like stars in the soft dusky atmosphere. Whenever Augusta thought of her, in after days, she thought of her as she saw her then.

The meeting was so sudden that, for the moment, it threw her off her guard ; she stepped back, hardly repressing a cry, and gazed for a moment blankly at the apparition. They had all, more or less, lost their self-possession, and did not know what to say or do. It was Christina who, standing there in the supreme unconsciousness which belongs to suffering, was the first to speak, holding out her hand with a smile.

"I wanted just to speak to you," she said, "though it is growing late. When did you come home?"

"Last week—no, rather sooner. We thought we had been away a long time," Augusta said, inco-



herently; and then she made an effort to command herself. "I was glad to come home," she said, with an attempt at a smile, but still with a quiver in her voice, "though my parochial duties do stand before me in such a formidable array. Who was your little godchild? Ought I to make myself responsible too for having the poor little creatures brought up in the way in which they should go?"

Christina smiled faintly, with a vague wonder; seeing the unnaturalness of her manner, seeing the struggle, and but half apprehending its cause: as for Mrs. North, she was affronted, as was natural, at the heartlessness of Augusta's light words.

"Christina, come; it is growing so late," she said. Then Christina held out her hand once more.

"Good-bye," she said, "I must not wait any longer. You will come and see me?"

There then rushed back to her mind the memory of Captain Cleasby's words: "You will let Gusty come and see you sometimes;" and for the first time the shadow of suffering darkened her face;

she turned away quickly, but yet Augusta saw it.

“Christina, will you?”—she said; and then suddenly her voice broke in sobs. “The church was so hot,” she said, as in the silence they gazed at her in amazement. “I am not accustomed to go to church,” she cried, with a candour which luckily could not reach the ears of her husband’s parishioners. It was a poor pretence at an excuse, but it was not without its use; it served to break up the conversation and make a natural ending to the scene. They were all more or less agitated, except Christina; she came forward quite unmoved, and let her mother take her away.

“I wish Walter had not done it,” cried Augusta, her tears returning when she was left alone with her husband. “Anything would have been better than this. I did not know it before; why have you wakened up my heart in me? It is making me altogether unprincipled.”

“Some people are very strange,” said Mrs. North

that evening to her sister Lotty. "If Christina had not been so calm, Miss Cleasby, I mean Mrs. Warde, might have undone everything. She had no right to break down before her. We have our feelings too, but we control them."

"Italy will put life into her."

"I hope so," said Mrs. North.

But the weeks passed and grew into months, and still Madame Ricardo was waiting until Christina should be well enough to travel. They always talked of it as a certainty! "When you come back from Italy," her mother would say, as if her return were near at hand: and her aunt would tell her of her home and of all the things that she should see, and Bernard would make plans for coming out to study foreign architecture and see her there. Christina listened to it all with a quiet smile, knowing their blindness, yet loth to dash their hopes. For other hopes had risen up in her at which they never guessed; hopes with which they had nothing to do, for whose accomplishment she was waiting. The

March winds were over; the April rains were past. She had waited for the warm weather to enable her to move, and now the heat was too much for her; "surely the weather was unusually hot;" so they talked, and still thought that she would be better presently. Yet they must know some time.

The June roses were blooming on the wall, the woods were once more casting quivering leafy shadows on the ground, the sun was blazing upon the white road, Christina sat upon the bench in the shadow of the wall, as she often sat now, with her hands lying idly in her lap, and her eyes wandering into the distance. The golden haze of summer hung over the distant hill; the insects were humming in the quiet air. Bernard came in at the gate with his fishing-rod over his shoulder. He came and sat down beside Christina. Was it perhaps something in her face, pale and still as it was, which suddenly struck fear into his heart? He had taken one of her hands and spread it out upon his own palm. How thin and small it looked! He gazed at it with a

sharp pang which he dared not analyze; and kissed it and laid it back again in her lap with a half laugh.

"Some people would be fond of such little hands," he said; "but I shall be fonder of them when they get a little bigger."

"But, Bernard, I think they will not change."

"Why not?" he said, almost impatiently; "what makes you say that? When you come back from Italy——" he broke off suddenly, and turned from the look in her eyes.

"Bernard, Bernard, it is not to Italy that I am going."

He kept his head turned away that she might not see his face, and forced back the cry that her words wrung from him into his heart.

"Oh, my God," he said, but quite low, so that she could not hear, clenching together in a painful straining grasp the hands in which hers had lain so softly.

"I have thought of it for a long time," she went on, "and now I want you to think of it too, that it may

not hurt you at the last. Bernard, you have always loved me better than yourself; Bernard, my dearest friend, you will not grudge me my rest."

She put out her hands pleadingly, and laid them upon his arm; but he put her gently away, and stood up and walked from her without looking back. Later he might speak to her, but not now. He stifled the moan in his heart that she might not hear; he turned his face from her that she might not see; and then he passed from her sight, turning the corner of the house and hidden by the clambering roses. He went and leant over the gate which led on to the heath. Later perhaps he might understand it, but not now. Standing in that beautiful green world, with the scent of the roses blown round him by the gentle winds, with the flitting butterflies and murmuring bees passing from flower to flower, with the sunshine on the purple heather; oh, it was impossible not to cry out against the approach of death. Now that she had spoken, it seemed so horribly near and yet so impossible. It was so

natural to him to be happy. He had suffered ; he had renounced the desire of his heart ; but yet the world was dear to him. This was Gōd's world as well as that other distant visionary land ; it was a world full of warmth and sunshine and loving-kindness. He had already given up so much, he had been content to sit with Christina's hand in his and see her eyes light up with grateful affection at his approach, and to know that the storms of passion were over and that she could once more trust him as a brother. This, too, was to be taken from him ; everything in which he had trusted. He was so young still, almost a boy, and his heart cried out against the inevitable, saying that God could not have given her back to him only to take her away for ever ; no, not for ever, but yet for that long stretch of time which seemed at such moments so unending, during which he must work and suffer and live. God knows she was right, he would not grudge it to her ; only he could not understand how it was that he must stay behind. When at last he remembered that



she might still be waiting for him, he turned, and, once more seeking in the simplicity of his generous heart to hide his despair and anguish, went slowly back into the garden.

She was sitting where he had left her, with the pink and white roses which he had gathered for her lying in her lap, and the green branches of the white blossoming jasmin, making a trellis-work upon the wall behind her head. Her sad, appealing, compassionate eyes, which had followed him as he walked away, met his now full of their wild tumult of horror and rebellion, and he saw that the disguise which he would fain have put on could not avail him. She had understood that, even in his madness as he recoiled from the first shock, he would not forget her; his misery was too much part of himself for it to engross him altogether.

She put out her hand and drew him down beside her, and then, at her soft pitiful touch, the hot tears for the first time rose in his eyes.

“Christina,” he said, “I cannot bear it. I cannot live without you.”

She said nothing for some moments, and when at length she spoke it was not of him but of herself.

“I, too, have felt that I could not ; but, Bernard, we always *can*. God finds a way, though we cannot find one for ourselves.”

“Christina,” he said, “if it is true, that thing that you said,—if that must remain, what matter what comes after? You are right. I think I would not, if I could, take from you that which you pray that God may bring to pass. If it must come, you at least will be happy ; but—— We will not talk of it now.”

There was again a pause, and a silence except for the rustling leaves, and the murmuring summer air, and the murmuring of the birds.

“You will listen to me, Bernard,” she said, after some minutes, “and we will not talk of that just now. We will talk of this world. It is beautiful,

and we have been very happy in it. We were happy in it when we were little children, and it may have seemed as if we might go back to those days again; but, Bernard, think that it could not have lasted for ever. Remember that there is a time of sin and misery which I dare not recall; remember that there is a place in my heart into which I dare not look; remember that there is an unceasing struggle in my soul—links which lie broken, hopes which lie dead, longings ever rising up which must be trodden under foot. My past is not only full of sorrow, but full of reproach. Bernard, God is taking all this from me, and presently you will thank Him too. You have done very much for me, but He is doing what no one else can do.”

He understood in part, and yet his human heart still rebelled against the pain and shrank back in trembling fear from the thought of parting. And Christina—she knew that the present was hard to bear, but did she know to what she was going? What was it which had come to her to make her

ready to depart, without fear or trembling, into that dark unfathomable future? Christina had so loved the earth and the sunshine and all that had once made her life: he had wanted to bring her back to it, and now she was going where he could do nothing for her, where he could take care of her no longer.

“I see,” he said; “I understand about this world, and if you are sure that you will be happier there——”

“God is merciful, Bernard, I cannot be afraid.” Her steadfast eyes were even now gazing into that future; he felt, with a strange mixture of pain, and shrinking, and gratitude, that what seemed to him so far distant was to her already near at hand.

## CHAPTER XXX.

IT was about a week later that Christina's convictions were officially confirmed by Dr. Evans. He had not wished needlessly to alarm them, he said, and it was most necessary to avoid agitating the patient. "It was a peculiar case," so he said, making an excuse to himself for his perplexities; but still from all he saw he thought that it was vain to hope she would be able to bear the journey to Italy; perhaps a little change to a place nearer at hand might be advisable. But Christina begged to be allowed to remain at home. "It is not a question of saving my life, you know," she said to Dr. Evans, who thought her composed manner heartless, "and I would so much rather remain quietly here; if

only every one need not know." They wondered at her desire that her state should be kept secret, until it occurred to them that she might dread Augusta Warde's sympathy, or fear that she might reproach herself or her brother. "We have always been a delicate family," Christina would say, tracing back the cause of her illness to any source rather than to the right one. After all, it was true that she had a delicate constitution; Dr. Evans had said so.

Madame Ricardo went back to Italy. She had already been long enough away from her husband and her little Berto, though if there had been any prospect of Christina's return with her she would gladly have delayed still longer; somehow the girl had won a place in her heart, and the tears stood in her brown eyes when she wished her good-bye.

"If ever you should think again of coming to us," she said; and then she stopped, and hurried away without being able to say more.

“Poor, poor Mary!” she cried, kissing her sister-in-law at the gate.

“It is a sad world: why should I wish to keep her?” said Mrs. North; and yet her eyes, too, filled. She felt it to be unreasonable, but yet she would have kept her if she might.

What avails it to tell the old sad story of a gentle lingering sinking to a quiet rest? The hot summer months crept slowly on; they did not see the change until it came. They did not talk of it to friends or strangers; only sometimes Christina would speak of it to Bernard, knowing that he had learnt, like her, to trust and wait, and seeking to make it better for him at the last.

It was towards the end of July that Augusta, coming home one afternoon from the school, was met by the maid hurrying to meet her with a telegram in her hand. Overton was such a small place, and so few things happened there, that a telegram was an unaccustomed thing. Augusta took it eagerly, and then for some reason or other could not make up



her mind to open it. It could not—no, it could not be from Walter—she had heard from him by the last mail; and yet if it was not from Walter, who else could have sent it? She went into her husband's study with the yellow envelope in her hand, and sank down in a chair, and held it out to him.

“What can it be, John?” she said, breathless. “It must be Walter. Oh, what has happened?”

“Nothing! nonsense!” said Mr. Warde; yet he too looked a little anxious as he broke the seal; but his countenance cleared as he glanced at the paper. “Your uncle Robert, only your uncle Robert; he is very ill.”

“How thankful I am!” exclaimed Augusta; and then she paused and laughed a little nervously; “I was so frightened, but I did not mean to say that. What is it? Since when is it?” and then he read:—

“George Waltham to Mrs. Warde.—Your uncle is dangerously ill. He would be glad to see you and your husband upon important business.”

It was only of late that Augusta had known her uncle ; but he had been very kind to her, and she had grown to like him. He had been so good to Walter just before he sailed, and had offered him money, though he had not been able to get it accepted ; which, to be sure, was Walter's fault. Now it was sad to think of the old bachelor life coming to an end with no one to say a kind word at parting but the family lawyer ; it was dismal to think of the great splendid house, and its solitary master, dying there alone.

“ And he might have married, I dare say, when he was a young man, and have had sons and daughters, and pleasures and cares like other men,” said Augusta, with a regretful pity which her uncle could never have understood.

“ He layeth up riches and cannot tell who shall gather them ;” so she kept saying to herself as she and her husband made their hurried journey that same night. Then, suddenly, it flashed across her : Would not this event, perhaps, make some change

in Walter's position? Where would her uncle's money go?

"It is horrid of me, John, it is horrid, when poor Uncle Robert is dying; but I cannot help thinking what will become of his money!" she cried remorsefully; and then her thoughts leapt back to her brother; and wonderings and desires would not be banished. She felt it ungrateful, unkind, and guilty to give way to such thoughts at such a moment; and yet how was it possible to help thinking that Walter might come back? Her mind was in a whirl as they drove from the station through the lighted streets. She said she could not go into his house with such feelings: "I cannot go in to see him and pretend to think of nothing but him, if all the time I am longing to say, Uncle Robert, do give Walter your money."

"You will not think of it then," said Mr. Warde; and he was right.

When the great hall-door was thrown open and they stood within in the lamp-light, and the servants

drew back, and Mr. Waltham came forward to meet them, Augusta trembled slightly, not with excitement, but with awe.

“He wishes to see you, Mrs. Warde, to see you alone first. He has been anxiously watching for your arrival.”

Augusta never forgot that evening. The lonely worldly man who had made it the work of his life to control his nobler impulses and bury his better nature—who had lived so long in his solitude, yet at this moment of his departure could not overcome a natural desire to see some one who would care for him and be sorry to say good-bye.

“I am setting out on my journey, Augusta,” he said feebly; “you will stay in the house until I am gone. I wish your brother had been here; but your husband is a kind man and will see to everything. I may not have done what I ought to have done with my life; perhaps I have made mistakes; my money has done no one much good

there is no one who has cause to be very grateful to me."

"I won't let you say so, Uncle Robert. Remember how you wanted me to come to you, and how good you were to Walter."

"Walter!" he said, and his manner was growing confused; "it is Walter that I was thinking most about. After all he is my own nephew—he will make a better use—Waltham knows all about it, Augusta. You will not go away from the house, and Waltham will tell you what I wish."

Mr. Warde had proved right; it was not of his money that Augusta was thinking now.

When Mr. Waltham told her that her brother was his uncle's sole heir, that she must write to him as soon as possible to come home by the next mail, and that he had orders, if it could be managed, to stop the sale of the Park, the tidings fell strangely upon her ears, and she burst into agitated tears of mingled joy and pain.

If only she could have known that this would

happen a little sooner ; but now, had not things been done which nothing could undo ? If the one thing could not be restored, prosperity and wealth would but mock at an incurable sorrow.

Public opinion was very much divided in Overton when it became generally known that the Cleasbys' fortunes were to be re-established. People had sympathized with their reverses, and then they had turned their minds to their probable successors at the Park. Captain Cleasby was a nice young man, but his foolish attachment to Miss North, and his precipitation in making it known, had somewhat lowered him in their eyes. Perhaps if his sister had taken better care of him and cultivated the more eligible young ladies in the neighbourhood, it might not have happened ; still they could not altogether exonerate him. It was true that they had resigned themselves and made up their minds to tolerate Christina ; indeed, some people had been interested by her even in her prosperity, and when misfortune overtook the Cleasbys,

when Walter left Overton, and it was understood that all that had been between them was at an end, then, though the current set still against him, it had taken a different turn. They had blamed him for his folly; now they blamed him quite as harshly for his worldly wisdom. If Christina had been like other girls and liked him a little, sufficiently well to marry him for his money and position and agreeable manners, then it would still have been hard upon her, but it would have been no one's fault but Fate's; but now, as they said, evidently it had been much more serious, and the poor girl's heart was broken. If she was dying from the effects of an ordinary fever, why should Dr. Evans look so mysterious and shake his head so sadly when they put their questions? No; it was clear she was dying of a broken heart. Overton was a matter-of-fact little country place: an insignificant corner of the dusty world where the wheel of life turned slowly with a smooth monotony; where people went to and fro upon their business or pleasure without any



startling events or thrilling incidents ; and yet there was an unacknowledged desire in their hearts to see with their own eyes something of glory and love and honour—those things of which the poets sang ; and this girl's life had come to agitate their tranquil waters and make a stir in the passions which lay dormant.

“Mamma, do you know they say that that girl Captain Cleasby was to have married is very ill. They say it is his fault ; he broke off the engagement and went away so suddenly, you know.”

“I wish you would not listen to such gossip, Milly,” said Lady Bassett ; “is it poor dear Walter's fault that he lost all his money through the unkind behaviour of General Cleasby ? I don't suppose it can have been any particular pleasure to him to go out penniless to America. I am sure, poor fellow, he looked wretchedly ill when he came to say good-bye ; but he had always such nice gentle manners.”

“I don't see that nice gentle manners are any excuse for breaking a girl's heart,” said Milly, in her youthful severity.

"Girls' hearts don't break so easily," said Lady Bassett, speaking from her long experience.

This was early in the spring; but a few months later people's opinions had undergone a change "She will marry her cousin," they said, "of course; she has suffered very much, but she is very young. She will get over it in time, and young Oswestry's devotion will be rewarded."

"Dear, dear! I am sure I hope so," said old Mrs. Gregson, sitting in her chintz-covered arm-chair by the parlour fire; for old Mrs. Gregson always had a fire, even in summer: to-day she was giving her monthly tea-party, and her daughter-in-law was pouring out the tea for the friends collected round the table. "Dear, dear! I am sure I hope so," said the old lady, nodding her head at them. "She was as pretty a girl as ever I saw. Girls are not so pretty as they used to be in my young days; but still I will say I never saw a prettier girl than Christina North. How well I remember her at the school-feast at the Park: I was telling

her about the time when I first married. I remember it as if it was yesterday. She should not have been in such a hurry to begin life ; she should have waited a little ; but I suppose Captain Cleasby was most in fault ; young people will be hasty—and he was a nice-looking young man too.”

“Young Oswestry is handsomer, though,” said Mr. Sim ; “the Norths are a handsome family ; do you remember Dick North ? He is very like him.”

So the talk went on, and by the time that the unexpected turn in the Cleasbys’ fortunes became known, Overton generally had made up its mind that Christina would marry her cousin. It was clear that she must do something.

Mrs. Gregson’s granddaughter Louisa, who was a little inclined to be romantic, had indeed been heard to say that perhaps Christina might find it impossible to put anyone else in Captain Cleasby’s place, and might remain unmarried after all ; but this idea was vehemently rejected by all sensible people. Their convictions were not even disturbed

by the news of Mr. Robert Cleasby's death, nor by the probability of Captain Cleasby's return to live once more at the Park. "Christina is so proud, she would never renew her engagement," they said; "and besides, young Oswestry is all but accepted now." They were not sorry that Captain Cleasby should be disappointed.

The public opinion, as was natural, was only rumoured in Augusta's ears, and it made little impression upon her. She had seen Christina too nearly to believe for a moment that anyone would ever occupy Walter's place; as to the rest, Christina was recovering, and she would be forgiving; they would be happy after all.

She had telegraphed the news to her brother; she had written by the mail; and now there was nothing to do but to wait—and, if only she might, to see Christina. But when she asked if she might go to the White House, Mrs. North wrote to say that she could not be received at present. Christina was not so well. It was nothing; the heat tired her; but they

wished her to be kept quite quiet ; above all, from any agitating topics or associations. "We tell her nothing that might disturb her mind," the mother said, giving Augusta to understand that she knew nothing of Walter's probable return. Augusta fretted and rebelled against the prohibition. "It would do her good to know," she said ; "they are killing the poor child, keeping her like this, always in the dark. Walter cannot be here for five weeks, and she is to remain in ignorance of what everyone else knows for all that time." Augusta had not seen Christina for a long time ; she had always been resting, or out of the way, or tired, when she had called to see her ; and the impression of that first meeting had been nearly effaced from her mind by all that had succeeded to it.

She could do nothing now but follow her letter in imagination, and wait in a fever of suspense for the weeks to pass, which must elapse before Walter could reach home.

## CHAPTER XXXI.

THE entangled threads of human life are twisted and broken by human hands: they are ours, to be turned and fashioned at will; mechanically, almost unconsciously, we weave our fate; discerning but dimly the consequences of our actions; knowing but little of what we are doing and whither we are tending; seeing, as in the magic mirror, shadows of the world and believing them to be realities; not knowing that we ourselves have cast the shadows and flashed the light between them. It is our power of choice which makes the tragedy of our mistaken lives. It is not that we are miserable, but that we might have been happy; it is not that we are lost, but that we might have been saved;

it is not that we stand alone, but that we stand alone by our own choice : we have chosen, and we must abide by our choice ; we are hemmed in, and we cannot retrace our steps ; our lost opportunities, our old desires and aspirations, lie far behind us ; other things have taken their room, we find no place for repentance, though we seek it “bitterly and with tears.”

When Walter Cleasby started in his new life, he told himself that the old life was past. What had been done could not be undone ; the worst was over for him and for Christina. Everything was new to him ; there was all the excitement and enterprise of an adventurous pursuit to engross him ; and yet it was an effort and a strain. Do what he would he could not forget ; could not forget what he had lost by his own fault. Yet still he struggled on ; struggled through the dreary winter ; passing the months as best he might ; waiting with fierce impatience for the mail ; dreading what he should hear, and yet hungering for news of Christina, and turning away im-



patiently from his sister's letters which said nothing of her. Surely if she had anything comforting to say she would say it; he was longing to hear, and yet something prevented him from asking any questions; each time when he was writing, he said to himself that it was useless to ask, he could get no answer for a month, and before that he would have received another letter from Augusta, telling him what he desired to know.

At last he wrote. "You say nothing of the Norths," he said; "tell me what you can."

In the meantime his anxiety was growing upon him, and his longing becoming almost unbearable. His nature was not an anxious one; responsibility had never weighed upon him; but now there was no one to whom he could speak, and his suspense was torturing him. He thought of her in a multitude of different ways: proud and composed, reckless and defiant, as silent, and as crying aloud. He tried to put her name into his prayers and to pray that she might be comforted, but felt it

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almost a mockery to ask that what he had done might be undone. He had thought that all this was past, and now it seemed as if it was all to come over again. He strove to put it from him, but a vision would rise up of Christina standing before him, with those reproachful eyes gazing into his. It was folly, it was madness, yet he could not escape them. If she had spoken, he thought, it would not have been so hard ; but she was silent as she had been when they met for the last time. The days passed slowly, and yet too quickly ; when the day came on which he might expect his letter, he would have given all he possessed that it might not come. He feared, he hardly knew what. He sat for a long time with the letter in his hand before he broke the seal, and when he had read it he laid it down again, and hid his face in his hands and groaned aloud. Was it for this that he had lived ? that he might win a girl's heart and leave it to break ; that he might put poison into her life and leave it slowly to take effect ? It seemed to

him all at once that he had been false to her; that he had shivered her faith and broken his trust: seeking to kill a love which could not die: he knew that he loved her, and he believed that she loved him still. He had severed the outward bond, but there was one that was invisible which he could not break. Why had he done it? He had suffered before, for her, and for himself; but he had not known the extent of his capacities for pain until he recognized that in obeying his creed he had sinned against nature and truth and God. And yet he thought that the door was not shut, that as yet it was not too late. If they were once more face to face, forgiveness and salvation might be still within his reach. So he thought in his ignorance, not knowing that repentance could not change what had been done, could not bring the dead to life again.

Thus, whilst summer was still reigning, whilst Christina was still waiting, whilst Augusta's letter was being taken across the sea and her message

had not yet reached the Transatlantic shores, he for whom it was intended was no longer there, and many a league thence in mid-ocean a fate was shaping itself, and in another corner of the earth an unlooked-for visitant was drawing near.

It was on a sultry day in August that Walter Cleasby came once again to the place that had been his home. The sun was blazing over the wide expanse of heath as he drove up to the little house they called the Parsonage. He had telegraphed from London, and his sister would be expecting him. It was nearly nine months since he had parted from her. Though as yet he did not know it, he was coming home to prosperity and riches; in his banishment he had so often yearned after Gusty's voice and the touch of her hands, and yet now, as he drove up and saw her standing at the door, he could not even summon up a smile for the sickness of apprehension that was upon him.

Augusta was standing upon the narrow doorstep, with the flush of agitation upon her cheeks, and a look in her eyes which had not only love and welcome, but compassion in it too. They neither of them spoke, as she kissed him, and drew him after her through the passage into the tiny drawing-room. He sat down on the sofa beside her, and put with his eyes the inquiry which his lips could not frame. Then he saw that there was something she was seeking to hide. She looked at him still with that strange pitiful regret; she had manifested no surprise; she had received him as if his arrival had nothing unexpected about it; there was something which had superseded her natural gladness and agitated joy at seeing him again.

"You are tired, Walter," she said, with a quiver in her voice. She was clinging to him and leaning her head upon his shoulder, perhaps that he might not see her face. "Oh, Walter, I have wanted you so often."

“Gusty, what is it? You are keeping something from me.”

Then she made an effort to speak, and gathered up her strength to tell him as best she might.

“I will tell you the truth, Walter,” she said; “I do not know how to put it into words: Christina is very ill.”

“You mean that she is dead?” he said hoarsely, staring blankly at her.

“No, no, not that,” she said; and then she burst into tears. “No, not that; but they say—they cannot give us hope.”

“It is false,” he said, standing up suddenly, and putting her from him. “It is false; it is impossible! You mean to say that I have killed her. Where is she?”

“She is at home. But, Walter!”

“Let me go,” he said, freeing himself from her detaining hand. The little boarded passage resounded to his tread, as he turned abruptly and made his way out of the house. Augusta, no one,

could do anything for him now. As he had sown so must he reap; it seemed impossible that a way was no longer open to him; but he must act alone; no one else could save him.

“Walter, where are you going? You will come back?”

“Come back! yes!” but he did not know what he was saying. She had said that there was little hope; but yet, as he rapidly made his way across the heath, his heart was still beating fast with the excited fear which only belongs to hope. He was come back to recall her to life; for the time there was room for no other thought but this, and that undefined apprehension and horror which suspense brings with it. The sky was one great burning vault above his head; it was still too early in the afternoon for any freshness to come to him in the evening breeze, and the level heath was bare of shadows. It seemed to him that there was something awful in the stillness and the unshaded light. The White House dazzled his eyes; the gate was



shut ; there was no sign of human life ; but the windows were all open to the sultry air. He walked up the garden path, not knowing what he was about to do, and stayed his hand for a moment, dreading by any sudden sound to break the stillness ; and as he hesitated a shadow darkened the doorway, and Bernard Oswestry stood upon the threshold.

“Stop there !” he said, standing as if to bar his entrance, with his hands against the door-posts. Walter looked at him as if he had been a stranger ; indeed at the moment he did not recognize him.

“Can Mrs. North see me ?” he said ; “you will not refuse to take my message ?”

“I will take no message,” said Bernard, with a ring of passionate scorn. His hands were clenched tightly over the edges of the wood-work with an effort at self-control, but his face was bloodless.

“What do you mean ?” said Captain Cleasby. He did not put the question with any anger

or impatience, nor yet with a shrinking from the answer ; he had forgotten his sin and his remorse, and everything but the fierce anxiety and desire of the moment. The pale faces confronted each other, and the eyes met—Bernard's gleaming with passion and scorn ; Walter Cleasby's made intense by suspense and pain.

"You mean," he repeated, "you will take no message, because——"

"Because she is dying, and you have killed her!"

Bernard had spoken in the low tones of passion ; but every word fell distinctly as it was uttered. It made no difference to Walter ; it brought no change over his face ; such words could be nothing to him now. He made no answer, but after a moment's thought he tore a leaf from his pocket-book and wrote a few words upon it. Then he laid his hand upon the bell. The flash of passion had died out of Bernard's face, as he stood still in the passage looking on.

“Wait,” he said, as he saw Captain Cleasby’s purpose; “I have been wrong. God knows, this is no time —— Give me your note; if you wait here I will take it.” He had hated the man, and for the moment his hatred had flamed out, when they stood so suddenly face to face; but it could not but die out in the presence of a paramount sorrow, and almost within the gates of death.

Walter Cleasby never knew how long he waited. He lay upon the parched grass beside the door in the shadow of the wall; and the shadow lengthened, and the breeze began to flutter in the leaves, and the evening glow spread itself over the land. He was not unconscious, and he had sufficient manliness not to long for unconsciousness, or to seek in any way to escape from the darkness and horror which was closing him in. The palpitating fear and the whirl of recollections and the horrible certainty had made chaos in his mind; he was altogether confused, and nothing could take a distinct shape in his imagination. He looked back to the time

when he had spoken to her first; he looked back to their parting, and to her words and his own; but it was as if he had been looking back at some one else's life; he had suddenly risen to a height of suffering which left those things in the far distance, Some one had told him a dreadful thing; it was not true; it was quite impossible; he did not for a moment believe it; but yet it had made him forget everything else. He tried to remember, and he could not. He had had a horrible dream; some one had come and told him that Christina was dying; that he had killed her. It was false; it was a lie; she could not be dying; she would come to the door presently and speak to him; she would come with her old smile, and with her hands stretched out; she would call him by his name.

But the stillness was not broken; it never would be broken by her voice thrilling his heart through the summer air. Everything was still as death, still as the grave; but it could not be that she was dying, with peacefulness all around her—with the

sun setting behind the hill, and the shadows slowly creeping further towards the east. Why had they said it? What was it they had said? he could not remember. And then, in the midst of his bewilderment, a picture rose up before his mind. The vision which had so long haunted him did not come back to him now; he did not see Christina as when they parted; but it seemed to him that he was once more walking in the spring-time through the tangled wood, in the hollow between the hills, and she was coming to meet him with the light of happiness in her eyes, and that smile upon her lips, and the fresh green boughs above her head making quivering shadows on her path. It could not be that she would never tread that path again. Some one had wanted to take her away; some cruel hand had been out-stretched to drag her beneath the cold waters, but he had come back to save her, and he would not let her go. Who was it that said she was dying! She could not be dying; he would not let her die!

He saw the white curtains blowing in the wind, he heard the swing of the gate, he saw Mr. Warde pass into the house, and was dimly conscious that he was gone to pray for her. It was not true; but still, they thought, that Christina was dying. He could not pray for her himself, because everyone was against him; he would keep her, but no one else could. He was struggling, and we cannot pray when one wild rebellion against God has filled our hearts.

It seemed as if he might have been lying there for days or weeks, when at last the summons came. It was Mrs. North, who called to him by his name, and met his dazzled, bewildered, horror-stricken eyes with that look of patient endurance which is more pathetic than tears.

"It could not have been if there had been hope, Captain Cleasby," she said; "but nothing can hurt her now. If it is any comfort for you to come, I will not deny it to you. She cannot be harmed. She will not know you." This was not the trembling

murmuring woman he had known before; he hardly recognized her in the dignity of sorrow. He did not believe it even now, as she motioned to him to follow her. He stepped softly up the old oak staircase; he passed along the winding passage, where the light fell in glimmering patches and the corners remained in darkness; he stood at the open door of the little room, where the wind was blowing through from the window; and there he paused and clasped his cold hands together and shuddered; for in the stillness he heard the sweet low voice, and the wandering talk.

"The birds are singing so loud," it said; "the clouds are moving so fast. I am going . . . they will come too. . . . Keep me safe, O Lord God, this night and for evermore. Amen. Bless my father and mother, and Bernard, and all Thy people. . . . I am so tired . . . I have forgotten my prayers . . . where is the book, mother? . . . forgive us our sins."

Oh, God! this was what they meant—it had come to him now. The truth was flashed upon him, and he could no longer hide his eyes from it. Struggle as he



might it must remain ; his passion was strong, but death was stronger. It had not conquered as yet, but he felt that it would be victorious. The strife was still manifest in his face amidst the anguish, when Mrs. Oswestry signed to him to come forward ; but hope had already given place to a crushing certainty.

He came forward in the silence, and knelt down by the bed.

They thought that she could not know him ; the last prayer had been offered up ; the last moment was near at hand.

She lay raised up upon the pillows, and her breath came in gasps. The soft wind, blowing through the creepers which clustered round the window, stirred her brown waves of hair ; her hands were clasped together ; her lips were slightly parted, and her rapt eyes fixed upon the glow which lay like a glory over the heath.

“ Christina,” he said, with a moaning cry, “ stay with me—stay here ! Pray to stay, and God will

hear. Come back, Christina, because I cannot die with you."

She turned her eyes upon him for a moment and smiled. "God bless Walter," she said softly, as if ending her prayer. She looked again towards the glow; the large leaves of the magnolia framed it in; the scent of the blossoms was in the air; the bare room, with the narrow white bed and the uncarpeted floor and the scanty curtain drawn aside, was flooded by the splendour of the sinking sun. Christina's eyes were looking beyond it. He felt that she was already gone from him. His cry could not reach her. Life and sin, parting and misery, and the passion of his love lay already far behind her. He could not bring her back. The mysterious halo of death was round her head; the glory of eternity was within her grasp; heaven was opening to her eyes; she must enter in and the golden gates must be shut, and he must remain outside. Yet there was a Presence within the room which forbade him to cry out—and awe had silenced his anguish. They waited in the still-

ness, knowing that they stood in the valley of the shadow of Death.

There is a grave in the little churchyard upon the heath, and a cross which marks the place, and letters which tell that Christina North, aged twenty years, died on the 1st of August, 1854.

They give to strangers the common record of a girl's life cut short ; but there are others to whom they tell a longer story. And some, whilst the winds are blowing in the woods, the heath flushed with purple, the sun blazing on the road, and the children's laughter coming up from the valley, are unconscious of all except that the White House is empty ; the gate broken from its hinges ; the shutters closed, and the rooms silent and deserted.

The Vicar's little children are making daisy-chains upon the lawn at the Park ; their mother watches them from the terrace. The place belongs to her brother, but people say that he will never live there again ; he comes to England every year, but they say

that there is a history belonging to that grave in the churchyard which makes it impossible for him to live at his home. He is a rich man now, but his riches do not seem to have brought him happiness ; he looks sadder, and his mouth has grown stern, like that of a man who has suffered. For a time his sister hoped that he would come back and live with her ; but now it is said that he is going to be married, and will always remain abroad.

The separation is a great grief to his sister, for she was always so fond of him, and she is not fond of many people. She often goes to the Homestead on the hill ; but it is almost the only house in Overton in which she is a familiar guest.

The Homestead is as peaceful as ever ; a place for roses and bees and sunshine : and Mrs. Oswestry is not lonely, for her son lives with her still. Bernard is prospering in his profession ; the beauty of boyhood still lingers about him ; his smile is as winning as ever ; it is only in his eyes that there is a shadow of patient waiting and a memory of pain. He will

meet life bravely, for that other life is near at hand ; he walks through the woods where they wandered hand in hand as little children, and across the meadows where her feet have trod ; the lilies which they planted blossom every spring under the garden wall, and the blessed memories are close around him. He will pass through life alone ; and yet not alone, because Christina is near him still. She will live for ever in his heart, though hidden from his sight.

“It is the living we have ceased to love,  
Not the beloved dead are lost to us.”

And she has passed from Death to Life ; passed to her rest : above the imperfect harmonies of earth ; beyond the sunsets, beyond the hills.

THE END.

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